

Jay Gatsby as “Bold Sensualist”:
Using “Self-Reliance” and *Walden* to Critique the Jazz Age
in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The
Great Gatsby*

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Abstract:

For years F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* has garnered attention from critics as having a relationship to American transcendentalist thought. While most acknowledge Jay Gatsby's corruption and materialism, they continue to hold on to a belief in his supposed idealism and difference from other characters in the novel. Even critics who note irony in the novel do not recant their arguments regarding Gatsby's romanticism. One cannot make a straightforward connection between transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau without noting how Gatsby is truly a perversion of transcendental ideals. Specifically, in examining Gatsby with Emerson's concept of self-reliance in mind, it is clear that Fitzgerald could never see Gatsby as a self-reliant individual. Indeed, Gatsby fails in every test that can identify him as being a self-reliant man. He is materialistic; he breaks the law for no larger purpose; he loves an insignificant and vapid woman who is as materialistic as the rest of this corrupt society; he has no true identity; he does not believe in himself; and he causes damage to the society. While the novel does not dispute the contention that the ideal of self-reliance is noble, it argues that such an ideal is unrealizable in the corrupt and materialistic society of the Jazz Age.

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Introduction

Since the publishing of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, there has been a tacit acknowledgement of the novel's connection to Romanticism in general and American transcendentalist thought in particular. Critics acknowledge the inheritance that Fitzgerald owes to the Romantic Movement. Richard Lehan notes "That *Gatsby* is a product of visionary romanticism is a point important enough to emphasize. We know of Fitzgerald's interest in the subject from the famous course in romanticism he took with Christian Gauss at Princeton" ("Text as Construct" 79-80). Lehan states elsewhere that "Fitzgerald by temperament was Romantic" (*Craft of Fiction* 49). Leslie Fiedler notes similarly to Lehan that "Fitzgerald worked" in "the tradition of Late Romanticism" (70).¹ Although critics agree that there are elements to the novel reminiscent of romanticism, they are less precise when it comes to defining the precise aspects of transcendentalism being used. Edwin Fussel, for example, shows that "Fitzgerald repeatedly affirms his faith in an older, simpler America, generally identified as pre-Civil War; the emotion is that of pastoral, the social connotations agrarian and democratic" (44-45).

Most critics who see romanticism and/or transcendentalism within *Gatsby* note some sort of problematic aspects within *Gatsby*.² For example, Lehan notes that "the

1 See also Milton Hindus (5).

2 See also pp. 37, 38, 39, 48, 49 (idealist vs. materialist), in Lehan's *Craft of Fiction*. For other discussions of Fitzgerald and Romanticism, see Lehan ("Text as Construct" 82), Fussel (46, 48), Lehan (*Limits* 12, 14, 27, 30, 33, 60, 62, 73, 123, 129), Irving Howe (38), Marius Bewley (33), Ronald Berman (*World of Ideas* 79-80, 156) and Robert Sklar (170, 195, 210). See also Stern (166, 168, 191, 250, 282, 288, 427, 457), Sergio Perosa (191, 192, 193), Ruth Prigozy (165), and Kermit Moyer (220, 221, 223).

true romantic, as we have seen in the case of Gatsby, is the son of God, repeating the godlike activity of creation. Such activity is not without its dangers” (63); he also notes “That Wilson, the custodian of the valley of ashes . . . murders the green dreamer, Gatsby, is an irony too obvious to belabor” (129). Lehan makes the statement about “romantic betrayal” being “part of his early conception of the novel” (27), just as Milton Stern argues that there is “transcendental, expectant devotion ending in whorish betrayal” (408) in the novel. However, no critics recant their statements regarding Gatsby’s romanticism. I, on the other hand, see no redeeming qualities in Gatsby that allow for his romanticism. His materialism negates the romantic self or self-reliant self. Stern, arguing that Gatsby is “the romantic” (191), states that although “Fitzgerald’s characters . . . do not read Emerson or Thoreau or Whitman . . . they do have a sense of the self as a ‘god in ruins’ to be liberated in the future” (167). Leo Marx discusses the fact that “In *The Great Gatsby*, as in *Walden*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Huckleberry Finn*, the machine represents the forces working against the dream of pastoral fulfillment” (358), a concern found throughout *Walden*, and he goes on to discuss these issues in the novel (356-364): “Gatsby’s tragic career exemplifies the attenuation of the pastoral ideal in America” (361). While Edwin Fussel generally mentions “Gatsby’s capacity for romantic wonder . . . [and] the vast back-drop of American civilization against which Gatsby’s gestures are to be interpreted” (46), he specifically mentions that Gatsby “recall[s] the more crowing moods of Emerson and Thoreau and the alleged ‘timelessness’ of their idealistic visions and exhortations, now, alas, like Daisy who gleamed like silver, somewhat tarnished” (48). Hiromi Kawachino mentions the “transcendental spark of the past” (75), just as Kermit Moyer refers to the “the core of

Gatsby's transcendentalism" (218). Ross Posnock's article about capitalism and Gatsby alludes to "Gatsby[']s] . . . 'romantic readiness' " (210).

Despite this critical awareness of a link between Fitzgerald and transcendentalism, the more detailed aspects of this link have never been made entirely clear. While Fitzgerald's inheritance to Emerson is generally accepted, his use of Emerson's concept of self-reliance with the materialistic Gatsby has yet to be investigated in detail. Stern generally notes that when "one confronts ideas in *Walden*, 'Self-Reliance,' or 'Song of Myself,' one reads concepts in which the liberated individual is the measure of value. And in all cases, short story or novel, the dream of Fitzgerald's characters is a dream of self at the lustrous moment of emergence from wanting greatness to being great" (166). We may know, for instance, that *The Great Gatsby* is indebted to Emerson and Thoreau, but the reader is not introduced to the possible implications of such an idea. Brian Barbour and Carmine Sarracino do pursue this more precise connection between Emerson and Fitzgerald at length. Also, David Marcell explores generally the relationship between Franklin, Thoreau, and Gatsby.

David Marcell connects Franklin and Thoreau with *The Great Gatsby*. He notes that "*Walden* . . . posits a view of human self-sufficiency that rejects categorically the social engagement and striving so central to Franklin's story" (75). He then makes a connection between Thoreau and Benjamin Franklin (75). Marcell further notes that "Using materials drawn expressly from the Franklin legend, Fitzgerald fashioned a tale of tragic irony and comedy . . . Jay Gatsby represents what time and the American popular imagination have done to the Franklin archetype" (76). He does argue that "it is impossible to separate the vapid, translucent Daisy from Gatsby's lurid fantasy" (76),

but he also states that “Daisy is essentially the screen on which Gatsby fatally projects his ‘incorruptible dream’ of romantic self-love” (76); he also notes that “Gatsby’s early courtship is expressly fraudulent, for it is based on his deceptive representation of himself” (76). Marcell confidently states that “Franklin, Thoreau, and Fitzgerald present significantly different perspectives on the question of innocence. Yet their voices are all distinctively American and equally instructive. Every culture needs its dreamers” (77). However, one should dream without a concern for conventional societal values. Although Marcell argues that “we need our Gatsbys too, for they reveal painfully the limits of human possibility” (77), he minimizes the shallowness of Gatsby’s true dream and the dubious means he has chosen to realize it.

Brian Barbour mentions self-reliance specifically in terms of Gatsby, but he reads Gatsby’s character in a straightforward manner.³ He argues that Gatsby is an Emersonian man, and he proceeds to describe the meaning of Emerson’s self-reliance: “self-reliance was based on trust, but it was decidedly not a trust in the ordinary self of

³ Other positive discussions of Gatsby include Thomas Stavola, who mentions that “Gatsby’s romanticism, a product of the spirit, is relentlessly optimistic in its quest for fulfillment within a materialistic society that denies the power of the spirit and offers instead the limitless material, and therefore exhaustible, possibilities of success, money, and romance” (130), and that “Although Gatsby may die of ‘a love for which there is no worthy object’, the grandeur of his vision remains. It manifests itself in the rare quality of his faith in the goodness of creation and in his ultimate, although only partially recognized, refusal to compromise with the ‘colossal vitality’ of his dream. Gatsby possesses an almost limitless sense of generosity” (Stavola 130). Bringing in the idea of complexity in Gatsby, Stavola also notes that “Fitzgerald recognized both the inadequacy of Gatsby’s goals and the grandeur of his romantic vision and pursuit” (139). Matthew Bruccoli notes that “The most obvious romantic quality in Fitzgerald is imaginative aspiration or illusion . . . Fitzgerald and his heroes aspire to an emotional perfection, to a level of experience that transcends the ‘unreality of reality.’ The closest he came to explicating this yearning was in his analysis of Jay Gatsby” (*Some Sort of Epic Grandeur* 121). Finally, John Kuehl argues that “Jay Gatsby is a hero because he is a romantic who has ideals, dreams, and illusions, who answers a call to something beyond life, who has the capacity to respond to the infinite possibilities of existence” (4). He states that the novel “is not only a romance. It is also a realistic study of a nation’s values and their effect on an individual” (4). He also notes that “Gatsby too has a feeling for . . . the transcendental” (7), just as he notes that “his is the tragedy of a romanticist in a materialistic society” (6) because “the concepts of American civilization deceive him, convince him that money can buy the ideal life of his dreams and illusions” (6).

the marketplace . . . much of its power lies in its promise to free the ordinary self from the materialism, stagnancy, and moral complacency of the enacted Franklidian dream. Its promise is in the future” (294, 295). While Barbour can note this, he at the same time asserts with no irony that Gatsby is still an Emersonian man.⁴ Further, “The new self is to be a moral self whose duty is to be always becoming, always extending and newly articulating the possibilities of life” (Barbour 295-296). Yet even though Fitzgerald clearly reveals through Gatsby’s daily schedule that he has attempted to model himself on Franklin as he understands him, Barbour goes on to analyze Gatsby himself as a man who has “Emersonian greatness” (296), for according to Barbour, Gatsby “is a version of the Emersonian dream: in a great imaginative act he has created himself and set out to explore the possibilities of life” (296). Barbour is misled into seeing that Gatsby’s appearance of romanticism links him to Emerson straightforwardly. Thus, Barbour can state that “Fitzgerald . . . lays his finger on what is tragically missing in American life: an articulated awareness of moral evil” (208-209), but he notes this while ignoring Gatsby’s actual corruption.

Carmine Sarracino sees problematic aspects within Gatsby, especially in reference to transcendentalism, but he maintains his argument that Gatsby is “The Last Transcendentalist”. He emphasizes the similarities one sees in Gatsby that seem to link him with transcendentalism, similarities that this thesis will show to be at best superficial and deceiving. He argues, for example, that critics who view Gatsby “as the arch materialist finally undone by excessive desire” are critics who “grossly distort” (37). Sarracino states that “Jay Gatsby is a portrait of an American transcendentalist, a

⁴ This term has its inheritance in John Peale Bishop (Moyer 215).

visionary who literally believes what Emerson insisted upon: that the possibilities of human existence are infinite, divine in fact; that the past is not by necessity a limiting factor in self-definition” (37). Further, Sarracino confidently asserts that “Gatsby is surely not a materialist, nor is he a romantic in the ordinary sense. He does not want Daisy, nor does he finally want Daisy” (38). His noting of a problematic romanticism within Gatsby still misses the point. Because there is little or no evidence in the novel that he wants anything but material wealth, this perverted romanticism leads Gatsby out of the realm of romanticism completely. Gatsby is without any redeeming qualities at all because of his greed, materialism, and obsession.

Sarracino also links Thoreau with Fitzgerald, noting that “Both saw that a human life of endless struggle to satisfy the basic needs . . . was a life debased and wasted” (38), but he only notes the surface similarities and neglects to notice the extent of the irony in placing a novel such as *The Great Gatsby* alongside “Self-Reliance” and *Walden*. Even though Sarracino is right in noting that “Gatsby becomes a chronicle of failure: the failure of the rich . . . the failure of the poor”, he persists in calling Gatsby “a transcendentalist visionary” (39), and he even cites Gatsby’s visions, his dreams, and his role as “ ‘son of God’ ” (40). He notes that “In *The Great Gatsby* . . . the freedom to define oneself without limitation, as the transcendentalists envisioned, is . . . filled with dangers” (41); Sarracino argues that “the first danger [is] the substitution of the material embodiment for the abstract ideal” (41). Further, “Gatsby . . . knows he has gone awry” (41). Also, “Gatsby’s third danger [is] self-deception” (42). These “dangers”, however, take one away from transcendentalism into a different realm: that of the bold sensualist. Ultimately, a bold sensualist is one who hides behind philosophy, and Gatsby is this

person. On a similar note, Sarracino can argue that “Gatsby becomes the opposite of self-reliance, that prime value of American transcendentalism” (42), but he still maintains that “*some ideal*, at least, guides Gatsby’s life” (44). Of course on the surface it is easy to see self-reliance in Gatsby, but any deeper examination of his lifestyle, his actions, and his words shows that self-reliance, as Emerson understood it, is about a form of self-realization that stands in defiance of conventional social values such as the attainment of wealth and fame. Sarracino argues that because completely corrupt individuals surround Gatsby, his dream seems so inviting by contrast. He never retracts his argument that Gatsby is “The Last Transcendentalist”.

Other critics note ironic tendencies in the novel. Gatsby’s romanticism is, as Richard Lehan observes, “inverted”: “Fitzgerald, in other words, depicts a Faustian hero--a man of longing--whose very desires” Lehan terms “ ‘inverted’ Romanticism” (38, 39). Irving Howe puts it correctly when he observes that “Jay Gatsby is his [Emerson’s] descendent along a bastard line” (33),⁵ since a life devoted only to the acquisition of wealth is absolutely incompatible with the Emersonian ideal.

Another way of putting this is to say that what drives Gatsby is a “perverted” form of self-reliance.⁶ Because this form of self-reliance is “perverted”, I will argue that it is no longer self-reliance as Emerson intended it. Arthur Mizener, for example, states that the novel’s “limitation is the limitation of Fitzgerald’s nearly complete commitment to

⁵ Irving Howe also states that “The deep, if unspoken, kinship that the writers of the Twenties established with their nineteenth-century forbears was that of simultaneously celebrating once again the pastoral vision of anarchic bliss . . . and ruthlessly assaulting that vision, as if to announce that in anarchy, even the mildest Emersonian variant, there can be no bliss” (32). Henry Piper makes a similar claim: “his [Gatsby’s] story affirms the unique value of as well as the limitations of the philosophy of romantic individualism” (124).

⁶ In this thesis, I am using “perverted” and “perversion” to refer to Gatsby’s superficial appearance of self-reliance because he is actually the complete opposite of the self-reliant man.

Gatsby's romanticism. This commitment is partly concealed by Gatsby's superficial social insufficiency, and our awareness of this insufficiency is strengthened as much as Fitzgerald dares strengthen it by Nick's constant, ironic observation of it: Gatsby is . . . a fake", and "this is a romantic irony which touches only the surface; it does not cut to the heart of the matter, to the possibility that there may be some fundamental moral inadequacy in Gatsby's attitude" (37-38).⁷ In fact, there is something very inadequate about Gatsby. He only appears to be a romantic self-reliant man, but he repeatedly proves that his romanticism is a veneer that covers a totally materialistic self.

Andrews Wanning also notes that "With Fitzgerald the mark of his style is more specifically a nostalgic irony" (164-165). Ironic elements in the novel have been examined; for, as Robert Emmet Long notes, "The sense of romantic alienation from life . . . that appears in *The Great Gatsby* seems convincing, partly because Gatsby evokes a deeply felt and lyric response to life that is checked and contained by Fitzgerald's irony" (155). Milton Hindus notes that "Fitzgerald's formula is to mix in a dash of romance with a liberal portion of the most brutal realism and then to drench to whole thing in irony" (37). Fitzgerald "(in contrast with his characters) is not taken in by these romantic elements" (Hindus 37). This irony allows "Fitzgerald . . . to make the reader feel the attraction and force of all those old-fashioned rules of moral behavior of which his characters are unaware" (Hindus 48). Hindus argues that Gatsby "is the ordinary American, the natural aristocrat, the incarnation of the romantic dream of the noble

⁷ See also Mizener (36).

savage” (44), yet he argues that Gatsby is the “romantic gangster” (48).⁸ Brian Way mentions that “*The Great Gatsby* itself is best regarded as a social comedy . . . The term . . . usually implies a mode of writing which is satirical and moral, and this is certainly true of his treatment of a number of characters and episodes” (111). Further, “The haunting tone of Gatsby is more than a skilful fusion of Fitzgerald’s satiric and romantic contraries” (Ornstein 74); as well, “Fitzgerald saw his romantic dream threaded by a double irony. Those who possess the necessary means lack the will, motive, or capacity to pursue a dream. Those with the heightened sensitivity to the promises of life have it because they are the disinherited” (75). But even Ornstein notes that “Gatsby is great” (79). Although Marius Bewley refers to “Gatsby’s immature romanticism” (47), it can be clearly shown that Gatsby is materialistic, and the contradiction in terms, the “corrupt” or “immature” “romantic”, is quite ironic. One can even think of Hindus’ statement that “Cynicism, it has been said, is often romanticism gone sour” (92).

One reason for this lack of detailed examination of self-reliance in Gatsby comes from confusion critics have with his character. Critics who see corruption in Gatsby want to hold on to the “romance” in him, the hope, the idealism, the capacity for “love”. Those critics do not recant their statements regarding his inheritance to romanticism. Other critics, such as Barbara Hochman, speak of Gatsby’s “essential, enduring goodness” in contrast with the “corrupt, murderous society” (142) he lives in. For example, Decker notes that “The standard procedure among critics is to interpret Gatsby’s dream according to Nick’s narrative demands: like Nick, critics usually

⁸ Leslie Fiedler similarly states that “It is surely no accident that the protagonist of Fitzgerald’s best book has, like his author, grown wealthy on Prohibition, the sensitive bootlegger as the last Romantic-the

separate modern corruption from a pristine dream located in the nation's distant past . . . between Gatsby's unethical business connections and the pastoral promise he inspires" (55). Therefore, if materialism and a self-reliant romantic cannot be reconciled, then Gatsby is in no way a romantic. The ultimate distinction to be made is that Gatsby is a parody⁹ of self-reliance, or a perversion. Gatsby himself only appears on the surface to have some of the qualities that a self-reliant individual has, but these qualities are superficial, and they do not have the ability to overpower his corruption and materialism. One cannot be truly self-reliant and a Jazz Age materialist at the same time, according to Fitzgerald.¹⁰ Fitzgerald is not criticizing the ideals of self-reliance, for these ideals are noble; what he sees is that Gatsby is one who can use the appearance of self-reliance to cloak his underlying materialism and corruption. If, as Emerson says, the "bold sensualist" will use self-reliance to gild his crimes, then Gatsby is such a man and is more flawed than critics are willing to admit. Fitzgerald discusses that there are more negative social implications resulting from the bold sensualist's use of self-reliance than Emerson was originally aware of, and the negative implications are implicitly explained through Gatsby's negative impact on this society. Although in the background of the novel, his criminal activities are obviously extensive and may cause

'great' Gatsby" (73).

⁹ I use "parody" in the sense of "A poor or feeble imitation" ("Parody", *OED*).

¹⁰ Howe notes that Milton Hindus argues that " 'Fitzgerald's trouble is that, like so many extreme romantics, he vacillated between two contrary views. He wanted to lead the good life from a spiritual point of view where it was quite certain in advance it could not be led' " while Howe argues that this statement "is priceless in its thorough misunderstanding" for "To decide in advance that 'the good life' is impossible in 'the desert of worldly values' is to forgo the writing of novels . . . [and] as he [Fitzgerald] worshiped wealth, youth, and glamour, they were surely false; as he later turned against them, his turning was true; but even in his turning, he kept some essential part of his earlier worship" (39, 40). Hindus gets closer to the point than Howe, in terms of the impossibility of living Emerson's concept of self-reliance in the Jazz Age. Fitzgerald's pessimism was not pointless. While Howe may say that the " 'crisis of values'

considerable social harm; as well, he is directly implicated in the death of Myrtle Wilson. The ultimate distinction to be made between the above arguments of the aforementioned critics and my own is that all those critics still see *something* redeemable in Gatsby, while I do not. This thesis will argue that Gatsby is nothing more than a bold sensualist.

This thesis will look at Gatsby in contrast with Emerson and Thoreau, as two people who personify self-reliance, one in theory, the other in practice; it will then be shown that Gatsby does not even remotely fit in. Chapter 1 will examine Emerson's delineation of self-reliance in his essay "Self-Reliance", an essay that defines the truly self-reliant individual and outlines how this individual should live. Thoreau further exemplifies self-reliance in his personal trek to the woods in Concord in *Walden*. A close examination of Emerson's "Self-Reliance", "Wealth", "The Transcendentalist", and Thoreau's *Walden* will reveal that Fitzgerald likely had these two individuals' writings in mind while writing *The Great Gatsby*. These individuals' ideas regarding self-reliance show the close but ironic inheritance that Gatsby shares with them. Chapter 2, an examination of Gatsby's milieu, will illustrate not only that it is lacking in meaningful values, goals, and morals, but also that it is completely antagonistic to the development of self-reliance as well. As Fussel notes, "it is equally essential to realize that Gatsby, too, has been derailed by values and attitudes held in common with the society that destroys him . . . [in fact], Gatsby is somewhat more than pathetic, a sad figure preyed upon by the American leisure class" (47). Much support for a sympathetic evaluation of Gatsby comes from the novel's narrator, Nick Carraway. But

. . . was no longer a problem, certainly not a discovery" (33), the problem was not obvious to those who were deceived by bold sensualists such as Gatsby.

it must be kept in mind that Nick, Gatsby's ultimate champion, is far from credible, and he is not at all self-reliant or admirable himself. Chapter 3, a detailed look at Gatsby, will show that although he initially appears self-reliant and romantic, a true example of transcendentalist ideals, the thin veneer of superficial romanticism gives way to reveal his true, dark, sinister, and distinctly non-self-reliant character. Therefore, the ultimate conclusion regarding materialism and self-reliance and the twenties is tied up in our "non-romantic" figure, Jay Gatsby. And, only with an understanding of how Fitzgerald sets up this ironic connection can we fully appreciate the negative aspects of the Jazz Age.

Chapter 1

Emerson and Thoreau: An Examination of Self-Reliance

Ralph Waldo Emerson develops the idea of living independently of societal values explicitly in his essay “Self-Reliance”. He gives practical advice on how to live authentically. Primarily, his examination leads the reader away from organized society and toward the individual and the individual need to examine and grow. Emerson identifies a society that would be ideally composed of true individuals. His adage, “envy is ignorance [and] imitation is suicide” (“Self-Reliance” 121), is extremely applicable in looking at *The Great Gatsby*. The self-reliant individual must “take himself for better, for worse, as his portion” (“Self-Reliance” 121). Emerson holds that “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men, --that is genius. Speak your latent conviction and it shall be the universal sense” (“Self-Reliance” 121). Emerson, in the same breath, would have one “Accept the place the divine Providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries, the connexion of events” (“Self-Reliance” 121). One should “Trust thyself” (“Self-Reliance” 121). Emerson’s advisory note at the beginning of his essay, “Ne te quaesiveris extra”, or “Do not seek yourself outside yourself” (“Self-Reliance” 120), shows how a self-reliant person should act, if he is to be true to himself and his convictions.

Emerson rejects the values of conventional society in his essay, asserting plainly that “Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its

members. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs” (“Self-Reliance” 122). Self-reliance, for Emerson, requires a rejection of society as it exists; conformity is the opposite of self-reliance. It is quite important for the self-reliant individual to reject conforming to all societal standards, for such conformity ties the person to society: “The objection to conforming to usages that have become dead to you, is, that it scatters your force. It loses your time and blurs the impression of your character . . . under all these screens, I have difficulty to detect the precise man you are. And, of course, so much force is withdrawn from your proper life” (“Self-Reliance” 124). If a person tries to please all aspects of society, this person’s “force” and effectiveness disappear. It simply is not practical to spread oneself so thin, simply to please conventional society. Conformity does not allow for the development of true individuality, and conventional society pressures the individual to adhere to values that the populace shares. For in conventional society, “most men have bound their eyes with one or another handkerchief, and attached themselves to some one of these communities of opinion. This conformity makes them not false in a few particulars, authors of a few lies, but false in all particulars. Their truth is not quite true” (“Self-Reliance” 124). Of course, “For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure” (“Self-Reliance” 124). Further, one of the problems that Emerson has with conformity is that it “explains nothing” (“Self-Reliance” 125). There is no expansion of individuality with an adherence to societal standards, and Emerson is aware that a self-reliant person will ignore the trappings of convention insofar as they threaten individual thought and action. Emerson goes on to advocate that “A man is to carry himself in the presence of all

opposition as if every thing were titular and ephemeral but he. I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions” (“Self-Reliance” 123). For Emerson, “life is for itself and not for a spectacle. I much prefer that it should be of a lower strain, so it be genuine and equal, than that it should be glittering and unsteady” (“Self-Reliance” 123). One must remember that Emerson valued practical concerns. He duly noted the value of certain things, while he maintained his belief that a society adhering to convention is a society none should desire inclusion within. For Emerson, “What I must do, is all that concerns me, not what the people think” (“Self-Reliance” 123). The self-reliant man does not worry about appearances and how his actions may be perceived, for in this insecurity lies the destruction of individuality and potential. He realizes that only when people live with an aversion for the conventional can a truly worthy society exist, one in which individuals live among each other.

Emerson identifies the role that work has in the self-reliant person’s life. He states, “If you maintain a dead church, contribute to a dead Bible-Society, vote with a great party either for the Government or against it . . . under all these screens, I have difficulty to detect the precise man you are . . . But do your work, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself” (“Self-Reliance” 124).¹¹ Emerson’s credo, “If I know your sect, I anticipate your argument” (“Self-Reliance” 124), shows the truly stifling nature of society. Emerson expands on this idea in his essay “Wealth” from *The Conduct of Life*. He states, “As soon as a stranger is

¹¹ As the editors of The Norton Critical Edition tell us, “In the first edition text (1841), Emerson wrote: ‘Do your thing.’ ” (124). In both circumstances this point applies. To emphasize work is to be more specific, but doing your “thing” allows also for the more general conception of individuality for the self-reliant person.

introduced into any company, one of the first questions which all wish to have answered, is, How does that man get his living? And with reason. He is no whole man until he knows how to earn a blameless livelihood. Society is barbarous until every industrious man can get his living without dishonest customs” (“Wealth” 693-694). On the subject of making a living, Emerson realizes that the value of the work being done is intrinsically important: “The first of these measures is that each man’s expense must proceed from his character Do your work, respecting the excellence of the work” (“Wealth” 708). The “excellence of the work” should be as the individual conceives it, while remaining indifferent to whether or not the choice of vocation is acceptable to conventional society.

In terms of wealth, Emerson takes a slightly different route from Thoreau, but he reaches similar conclusions. He refers to “articles of necessity” (“Wealth” 695), just as Thoreau refers to things being “necessary of life”. However, Emerson has a slightly different view on wealth than Thoreau. He does believe that “Wealth begins in a tight roof that keeps the rain and wind out in two suits of clothes, so as to change your dress when you are wet” (“Wealth” 695). Emerson believes that man “is born to be rich. He is thoroughly related; and is tempted out by his appetites and fancies to the conquest of this and that piece of nature, until he finds his well-being in the use of his planet, and of more planets than his own He is the rich man who can avail himself of all men’s faculties” (“Wealth” 696). Further, “Poverty demoralizes” (“Wealth” 697). Emerson wants wealth to be used properly, not excessively, and as a means to larger and worthy ends: “The life of pleasure is so ostentatious that a shallow observer must believe that this is the agreed best use of wealth, and, whatever is

pretended, it ends in cossetting . . . Men of sense esteem wealth to be the assimilation of nature to themselves” (“Wealth” 698). To expand on the actual use of money, Emerson notes that the truly self-reliant person does not want money as an end: “Whilst it is each man’s interest that not only ease and convenience of living, but also wealth or surplus product should exist somewhere, it need not be in his hands. Often it is very undesirable to him. Goethe said well, ‘Nobody should be rich but those who understand it’” (“Wealth” 700). But, most interestingly, Emerson notes the moral nature of money: “Money is representative, and follows the nature and fortunes of the owner. The coin is a delicate meter of civil, social and moral changes . . . Wealth is mental; wealth is moral. The value of a dollar is, to buy just things; a dollar goes on increasing in value with all the genius and all the virtue of the world” (“Wealth” 702-703). And, while “Pride is handsome, economical”, “vanity costs money, labor, horses, men, women, health and peace, and is still nothing at last; a long way leading nowhere” (“Wealth” 709). Money can be used properly, and in that sense wealth is favourable. Most importantly, “The secret of success lies never in the amount of money, but in the relation of income to outgo” (“Wealth” 711). Again, to reiterate, Emerson does not believe in wealth as a means to happiness; he believes in the right spending of wealth: “Friendship buys friendship; justice justice . . . It is to spend for power and not for pleasure. It is to invest income . . . Nor is the man enriched, in repeating the old experiments of animal sensation; nor unless through new powers and ascending pleasures he knows himself by the actual experience of higher good to be already on the way to the highest” (“Wealth” 715-716). Self-reliance allows people to understand the tools that the world offers and use these benefits properly.

In “Self-Reliance”, Emerson argues against the “reliance on Property, including the reliance on governments which protect it, [for] it is the want of self-reliance” (136). Emerson further notes that “They measure their esteem of each other, by what each has, and not by what each is” (“Self-Reliance” 136). According to Emerson, “Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles” (“Self-Reliance” 137). Ownership and material possessions cannot bring self-fulfillment, because true self-fulfillment must originate within the individual. Therefore, a reliance on property, a conventional standard in society, will not foster individuality.

The “bold sensualist” of Emerson’s description deserves examination, for this person is a perversion of self-reliant ideals. As Emerson explains, “The populace think that your rejection of popular standards is a rejection of all standard, and mere antinomianism; and the bold sensualist will use the name of philosophy to gild his crimes. But the law of consciousness abides” (“Self-Reliance” 131). This last, somewhat cryptic, remark seems to indicate confidence on Emerson’s part that such individuals would be easy to identify and deal with. Emerson may not have realized that this “bold sensualist” may be mistaken by many as a truly self-reliant person and may cause significant social damage. As will be seen, Fitzgerald seems to be asking what are the consequences if the bold sensualist, playing the part of a self-reliant person, has everyone convinced? In fact, the bold sensualist may be harder to recognize than Emerson thought.

To expand further on this idea of the “bold sensualist”, one may look at Emerson’s treatment of the “materialist” versus the “idealist” in his essay “The

Transcendentalist". Emerson states that "The materialist, secure in the certainty of sensation, mocks at fine spun theories, at star-gazers and dreamers, and believes that his life is solid . . . Yet how easy it is to show him, that he also is a phantom walking and working amid phantoms" ("The Transcendentalist" 94). According to Emerson, "The materialist respects sensible masses, Society, Government, social art, and luxury, every establishment" ("The Transcendentalist" 94). In terms of Emerson's description of transcendentalists, these people "are lonely; the spirit of their writing and conversation is lonely; they repel influences; they shun general society" ("The Transcendentalist" 98). Further, "With this passion for what is great and extraordinary, it cannot be wondered at, that they are repelled by vulgarity and frivolity in people. They say to themselves, It is better to be alone than in bad company. And it is really a wish to be met,--the wish to find society for their hope and religion,--which prompts them to shun what is called society" ("The Transcendentalist" 100). Emerson's statement that "for the path which the hero travels alone is the highway of health and benefit to mankind" ("The Transcendentalist" 104) further delineates the true path of an individual who does not want or need societal reassurance.

The actualization of the self-reliant life is seen in Thoreau's *Walden*. Thoreau embarks on an excursion into the Concord woods that shows in great detail a life a self-reliant being could really live. Thoreau's first chapter, "Economy", shows a distaste for owning property, similar to Emerson. He "see[s] young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools . . . Better if they had been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolf, that they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in. Who made them

serfs to the soil?” (*Walden* 2). A common theme, repeated throughout, is the idea that men must make their own destinies. Thoreau cites “a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, [in which] they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool’s life, as they will find when they get to the end of it” (*Walden* 3). The problem lies in the fact that men do not realize their potential: “Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion. What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate” (*Walden* 4). People tend to ignore the truth that lies within, and Thoreau’s idea that “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” (*Walden* 5) calls to mind the people who are immersed within societal confines, unable to escape. Common to both Thoreau and Emerson is the idea that men must be individuals, and men must reject the societal values esteemed by the populace.

One of the “necessaries” (*Walden* 7) of everyday life that Thoreau addresses in terms of living an independent lifestyle is food. He states, “None of the brute creation requires more than Food and Shelter. The necessities of life for man in this climate may, accurately enough, be distributed under the several heads of Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel; for not till we have secured these are we prepared to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success” (*Walden* 7-8). Thoreau knows the importance of the basic needs of human beings. He knows, as well, that humans tend to turn their needs into wants, and then these wants become necessities when they are in fact not necessary at all. Thoreau expounds upon this idea, noting “What pains we accordingly take, not only with our Food, and Clothing, and Shelter, but with our beds, which are our night-clothes, robbing the nests and breasts of birds to

prepare this shelter within a shelter, as the mole has its bed of grass and leaves at the end of its burrow!” (*Walden* 8). It is evident for Thoreau that one should “Consider first how slight a shelter is absolutely necessary Many a man is harassed to death to pay the rent of a larger and more luxurious box who would not have frozen to death in such a box as this” (*Walden* 19). Shelter proves to be something for which humans expend great energy to acquire, and Thoreau feels that people should see this as a fault in society: “If it is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the condition of man,--and I think that it is, though only the wise improve their advantages,--it must be shown that it has produced better dwellings without making them more costly” (*Walden* 21). In terms of the poor farmer, “when the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him” (*Walden* 22). The acquisition of shelter is allowed to control the intellect of mankind, and people do not recognize the power the place in which they sleep has over them. Further, “Most men appear never to have considered what a house is, and are actually though needlessly poor all their lives because they think that they must have such a one as their neighbors have” (*Walden* 24). It is true for Thoreau that “While civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them. It has created palaces, but it was not so easy to create noblemen and kings” (*Walden* 23). Shelter and food are important, but for Thoreau true riches should be within the human spirit. Thoreau’s own house shows his self-sufficiency: “My dwelling was small, and I could hardly entertain an echo in it; but it seemed larger for being a single apartment and remote from neighbors” (*Walden* 162). Thoreau does not believe in sacrificing independence for shelter: “I was not anchored to a house or farm, but could follow the

bend of my genius, which is a very crooked one, every moment” (*Walden* 38). The people who rely on property are not demonstrating their ability to exercise independence of thought.

Clothing is also shown to be a very important “necessary of life” that is actually not as necessary when Thoreau looks at the undue importance it has occupied throughout history. People misuse clothing as something that becomes a form of status identification and masking. Of course, there is a use for clothing: “As for Clothing . . . perhaps we are led oftener by the love of novelty, and a regard for the opinions of men, in procuring it, than by a true utility. Let him who has work to do recollect that the object of clothing is, first, to retain the vital heat, and secondly, in this state of society, to cover nakedness” (*Walden* 14). People use clothing for shelter and modesty, yet there is this fascination with clothing and what it represents. In terms of royalty, “Kings and Queens who wear a suit but once though made by some tailor or dressmaker to their majesties, cannot know the comfort of wearing a suit that fits. They are no better than wooden horses to hang the clean clothes on” (*Walden* 14). A further problem occurs when clothing becomes a part of identity itself: “Every day our garments become more assimilated to ourselves, receiving the impress of the wearer’s character, until we hesitate to lay them aside” (*Walden* 14). Reliance on clothing, as an expression of self, is a form of reliance on society, therefore leaving no room to develop autonomy: “No man ever stood the lower in my estimation for having a patch in his clothes; yet I am sure that there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience” (*Walden* 14). Value that is misplaced, especially on something necessary of life but unnecessary in its overvalued

state, is a tragedy for Thoreau. When one mistakenly believes that one's worth is related to the expressiveness of one's clothing or shelter, one is neglecting the importance of a healthy mind and spirit. Thoreau sees this tragedy in America: "Even in our democratic New England towns the accidental possession of wealth, and its manifestation in dress and equipage alone, obtain for the possessor almost universal respect. But they who yield such respect, numerous as they are, are so far heathen, and need to have a missionary sent to them" (*Walden* 15). Further, this dependency leads to Thoreau's idea that clothing is also used to mask truth and identity. He states, "We don garment after garment, as if we grew like exogenous plants by addition without. Our outside and often thin and fanciful clothes are our epidermis or false skin, which partakes not of our life, and may be stripped off here and there without fatal injury" (*Walden* 16). For Thoreau, he realizes that "our shirts are our liber or true bark, which cannot be removed without girdling and so destroying the man" (*Walden* 16). However, "It is desirable that a man be clad so simply that he can lay his hands on himself in the dark, and that he live in all respects so compactly and preparedly, that, if an enemy take the town, he can, like the old philosopher, walk out of the gate empty-handed without anxiety" (*Walden* 16). Further, "All costume off a man is pitiful or grotesque. It is only the serious eye peering from and the sincere life passed within it, which restrain laughter and consecrate the costume of any people. Let Harlequin be taken with a fit of the colic and his trappings will have to serve that mood too. When the soldier is hit by a cannon ball rags are as becoming as purple" (*Walden* 17). In short, Thoreau says clothes are necessary, but necessity requires only the merest amount of clothing to protect one fully from the elements. Thoreau believes in stripping down

to the bare essentials, and he argues that only then can one begin to live a lifestyle without a concern for conventional societal values.

Thoreau's own experience highlights many of the qualities that an autonomous person must have. He shows himself to be very concerned with the amount of actual money he spends; for instance, he sets down the costs to build his house, and listing these costs gives him a sense of exactly what price he paid for having this shelter: "I intend to build me a house which will surpass any on the main street in Concord in grandeur and luxury, as soon as it pleases me as much and will cost me no more than my present one" (*Walden* 33). He spends much time in a tongue-in-cheek manner, recounting his various expenses (*Walden* 40-41), but this simply shows that a self-reliant man need not be overly preoccupied with or dependent on societal values and things. He states, "These statistics, however accidental and therefore uninformative they may appear, as they have a certain completeness, have a certain value also. Nothing was given of me of which I have not rendered some account" (*Walden* 41). In terms of nourishment, Thoreau "learned from . . . two years' experience that it would cost incredibly little trouble to obtain one's necessary food, even in this latitude, and yet retain health and strength" (*Walden* 41). The self-reliant man finds excessive material possessions unnecessary and asks "What man but a philosopher would not be ashamed to see his furniture packed in a cart and going up country exposed to the light of heaven and the eyes of men, a beggarly account of empty boxes?" (*Walden* 44). Thoreau's furniture "consisted of a bed, a table, a desk, three chairs, a looking-glass three inches in diameter, a pair of tongs and andirons, a kettle, a skillet" (*Walden* 44); the list goes on for a length of time. One can survive quite happily without an excess of furniture: "I

had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society” (*Walden* 94). Even for curtains Thoreau relies heavily on nature and not society’s trappings: “it costs me nothing for curtains, for I have no gazers to shut out but the sun and moon, and I am willing that they should look in . . . nor will the sun injure my furniture or fade my carpet . . . I find it still better economy to retreat behind some curtain which nature has provided, than to add a single item to the details of housekeeping” (*Walden* 45). Thoreau knows that the beginnings of materialism are inevitable if one does not remain independent of what is not considered necessary of life: “A lady once offered me a mat, but as I had no room to spare within the house, nor time to spare within or without to shake it, I declined it, preferring to wipe my feet on the sod before my door. It is best to avoid the beginnings of evil” (*Walden* 45). The ability to resist such “beginnings of evil” is one way of separating the self-reliant beings from the people who are dependent on society. Thoreau shows his self-sufficiency: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (*Walden* 61). The truly independent man lives his life truthfully and conscientiously, and he lives his life without a need for things.

Thoreau’s descriptions of his own solitude show that a person who lives without a concern for conventional societal demands does not need constant companionship: “I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude” (*Walden* 91). In terms of solitude, Thoreau makes the distinction between God and Satan that directly relates to human

beings: “God is alone,--but the devil, he is far from being alone; he sees a great deal of company; he is legion” (*Walden* 92). Therefore, in solitude one is able to find his or her own thoughts and become the independent person that a self-reliant person needs to be. Although Thoreau “love[s] society as much as most” (*Walden* 94), one must not forget that this society to which he is referring is the common humanity that belongs to all people, not the society that requires dependence on material gains and values other people on the basis of their wealth and status. Again, Thoreau recommends that one be content with basic necessities. Our ability to be self-reliant and aware results in our putting less focus on material objects and more on inward ideas, or being “rich in inward” (*Walden* 9). Ultimately, Thoreau does not want to cling to society. He wants humans to live their lives as free from conventional societal concerns as he has. He states, “Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage. Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends. Turn the old; return to them. Things do not change; we change. Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts. God will see that you do not want society” (*Walden* 219). Further, “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth” (*Walden* 221). Self-reliance does not come from money or fame; it can only result from first being contented with basic necessities of life.

In looking primarily at Emerson’s prescription for the individual in “Self-Reliance” and Thoreau in *Walden*, the ironic connections between Gatsby and a truly self-reliant man become immediately evident. Gatsby desired to make himself powerful, rich, and connected; he does not really believe in himself because his entire persona has been designed with conventional societal values in mind. As for his “dream”, it is based on false idols and false value systems. In fact, Gatsby has complete

faith in conventional society's values and ideals. He is a man whose entire vision of self-fulfillment is based on acquisition of money, property, and people. Gatsby does not satisfy himself with his own feelings and beliefs; he has to rely on the amassing of wealth or the acquisition of Daisy Buchanan to bring fulfillment.

Gatsby is the ultimate conformist, for everything he does is based on an acceptance of the values of a society that is obsessed with amassing fortunes and throwing parties. All that Gatsby is (and is described as) relates to spectacle, be it in his car, his house, his clothing, his speech, or his parties. Nick even tells Gatsby that his “ ‘place looks like the world's fair’ ” (*GG* 86). Gatsby is trying to impress, and people who need to impress do not meet Emerson's ideal of self-reliance. Gatsby is obsessively driven by what people think of him.

Gatsby is truly the “bold sensualist” of Emerson's description, a man who has fooled many into believing in his “dream”, although his dream is frivolous. And, if “vulgarity and frivolity” repel the self-reliant individual, then the reader may ask what Gatsby is in fact doing by chasing Daisy. Further evidence to keep in mind, especially in looking at Gatsby, is that we know Gatsby's dream only benefits himself. Gatsby lives in a palace, but he is no king. The same goes for his society. W. J. Harvey notes that “They live in houses that may be palaces but are certainly not homes; their intellectual ideas are shoddy and their moral attitudes to life are at best the detritus of a collapsed social framework, second-hand and conventionally assumed” (81).

Of course, Gatsby and his cronies do not live according to the necessities of life; they live according to desire alone. He is driven by, and for, money in itself. He strives to obtain Daisy as well, but his obsession with Daisy thinly masks his obsession with

money. Any similarities between Gatsby and men such as Emerson and Thoreau are quickly countered when we examine Gatsby's values. The final chapter will show that Gatsby himself, although appearing to contrast with his surroundings, shares the values of conventional society and is driven by a need to conform, as are the other figures in the novel. The following chapter will demonstrate the extent to which the milieu in *The Great Gatsby* is utterly unreceptive to the development of an Emersonian concept of self-reliance.

Chapter 2

The Corrupt Milieu: The Jazz Age as Wasteland¹²

Although only a few critics make explicit references to self-reliance in their analyses of *The Great Gatsby* and its relationship to American Transcendentalism, the link between the novel and this body of thought is generally acknowledged as I demonstrated in the introduction. Because the concept of self-reliance was such a key element in Transcendentalist thinking, it is implicit in these critics' examination of the novel in relation to Emerson and Thoreau. Accordingly, my discussion of self-reliance in relation to the novel is valid because of its centrality to the transcendentalists' prescriptions for the proper conduct of life. In depicting a society that is lacking in self-reliance, Fitzgerald gives added emphasis to the emptiness and the frivolous nature of Jay Gatsby's goals, for Gatsby wants to be included in this society. Honesty, truthfulness, compassion, and a capacity for pure love are not to be found in any of the characters in *The Great Gatsby*. Money, greed, and corruption all permeate the society that surrounds Gatsby. Qualities such as brutality, vapidness, dishonesty, and

¹² A comparison between T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *The Great Gatsby* has been made, for example, by Lionel Trilling (204) and John W. Bicknell in "The Waste Land of F. Scott Fitzgerald" (Tredell 61); James Miller notes that "At one point, Fitzgerald refers to the valley as 'the waste land' (29), suggesting that it stands as a symbol for the spiritual aridity of the civilization about which he writes--the kind of barren and waterless land that T.S. Eliot had conceived in his poem of that name" (*F. Scott Fitzgerald* 124). James E. Miller states that "Meaningless sex and meaningless conversation resolve into meaningless violence, in a life as empty and shallow and sterile as any described in *The Waste Land*" ("Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*" 246-247). Lehan, in *Limits of Wonder*, notes this connection as well, even stating that George Wilson is "similar to the walking dead . . . [in] *The Waste Land*" (93). Susan Resneck Parr also makes a similar connection, noting that Daisy "has become like one of the hollow voices in Eliot's *The Waste Land*" (669).

materialism are all found in this society, and individually in each character, be they inhabitants of West Egg, East Egg, or New York.

The background characters in this society are just as corrupt as the main characters in *The Great Gatsby*. As James Miller notes, “the comparatively ‘proper’ dinner party at the Buchanan’s [sic] in East Egg, the wild drunken party at Tom and Myrtle’s apartment in New York, and the huge, extravagant party at Gatsby’s mansion in West Egg . . . serve to introduce, dramatically, all of the important characters and places in the novel and seem, perhaps, so selective as to give the impression of artificiality” (*F. Scott Fitzgerald* 117). The minor players in the novel flesh out a picture of the decadent¹³ society in this novel; further, as F.H. Langman notes, “The social corruption depicted in the novel serves as more than a background or framework for Gatsby’s story. Gatsby himself is at once its product and its leading spirit” (40). These people demonstrate desire and greed, for they all believe in, and want inclusion in, conventional society. In terms of the poor, people such as Myrtle Wilson, her sister, and the McKees want to be a part of conventional society; these people lack wealth, but their lack of money does not mean that they are self-reliant people, indifferent to material things. In terms of the relatively wealthy, Gatsby’s partygoers show the people of the Jazz Age who want nothing more than good times and drinking. All of these characters simply want to be included in the set that goes to parties and lives a decadent lifestyle. In looking at these figures, one can see the levels and layers of greed, desire, and vulgarity that not only surround Tom Buchanan and Nick Carraway, but also

¹³ Although this word also has to do with “a state of decay or decline; falling off or deteriorating from a prior condition of excellence” (“Decadent”, *OED*), I am using this word as well to mean being “characterized by or appealing to self-indulgence” (“Decadent”, *Merriam Webster Dictionary*).

surround Gatsby himself.¹⁴ There is a “rootlessness of postwar American society” and this society has “restless alienation, and its consequent reliance on money as a code for expressing emotions and identity” (Lewis 46); as Lewis asks, “How do the members of such a rootless, mobile, indifferent society acquire a sense of who they are? Most of them don’t” (47). Lehan concurs, adding that there is no “moral center” (*Limits* 31) in the novel. Corruption and materialism surround all of the figures in this novel, and not one of the characters shows self-reliance in his or her actions.

Tom Buchanan introduces the reader to Myrtle Wilson and her vulgar set. This group includes specifically her sister Catherine, Mr. and Mrs. McKee, and in this case, Tom and Nick, among other guests. As we can see, “The scene in the New York apartment works its way ultimately to a kind of raw, sinister farce, again thoroughly dramatized. What makes it so dramatic, and gives the comedy its edge, is that it is suddenly seen not from Nick’s point of view but from that of the bewildered, alcohol-stupefied Mr. McKee” (Langman 38). Myrtle is obviously pretending to be something she is not; she wants to be a woman Tom would perhaps marry. Myrtle constantly strives for attention, and she desires wealth. Her friends are not very different from her, and their similarities become evident as their evening in her New York apartment shows. In this apartment are many indications that this place is lacking in taste and elegance: “The living room was crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture

¹⁴ As James E. Miller notes, “The first two chapters of *The Great Gatsby* similarly juxtapose two separate but intricately interrelated worlds, the rich and baroque world of the East Egg mansion of the Buchanans and the mean and grotesque world of the Myrtle Wilson-Tom Buchanan trysting apartment in New York” (“Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby*” 246). Long approaches this idea as well, noting that “The lower-middle class characters who gather at the Washington Heights apartment—Myrtle, Catherine, and the McKees—are all different from one another, and yet they are all alike, in their dim aspirations and baseless pretensions”, and “The East Egg set—the Buchanans and Jordan Baker—are also different from one another and yet the same, their psychologies having been molded by the same environment. In neither case is there any possibility of their developing beyond the limits of the environments that brought them into being” (154).

entirely too large for it so that to move about was to stumble continually over scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles” (*GG* 33). Even more details emphasize the truly vulgar setting of the room: “The only picture was an over-enlarged photograph, apparently a hen sitting on a blurred rock. Looked at from a distance however the hen resolved itself into a bonnet and the countenance of a stout old lady beamed down into the room. Several old copies of ‘Town Tattle’ lay on the table together with a copy of ‘Simon Called Peter’ ” (*GG* 33). As Matthew Bruccoli tells the reader, “This popular novel . . . was regarded as immoral by Fitzgerald” (Explanatory Notes 209), and although I am not examining this society with personal values in mind, Fitzgerald’s opinion regarding the tastes of his characters adds to the reader’s impression that these people are lacking in what he would call class. Importantly, they possess essentially identical desires and needs as do the rich. The evidence scattered throughout the room is indicative of the shallow interests and trashy tastes of the hosts. As W.T. Lhamon, Jr. states, this scene “indicates the inability of Myrtle and her friends to maintain any order” (169). The setting denotes a type of people, a set that wants to be rich and famous and has no concept of the Emersonian and Thoreauvian ideals of self-reliance, which is to say that these people are truly unaware of living independently of conventional societal values.

In terms of the characters in this room, there seems to be something about each character that is “off” in some way. Catherine, Myrtle’s sister, is “a slender, worldly girl of about thirty with a solid sticky bob of red hair and a complexion powdered milky white. Her eyebrows had been plucked and drawn on again at a more rakish angle but the efforts of nature toward restoration of the old alignment gave a blurred air to her

face” (*GG* 34).¹⁵ The image of Catherine is quite strange when delineated in such a way. Nick states, “She came in with such a proprietary haste and looked around so possessively at the furniture that I wondered if she lived here. But when I asked her she laughed immoderately, repeated my question aloud and told me she lived with a girl friend at a hotel” (*GG* 34). Nick describes Mr. McKee in a strange manner as well: “Mr. McKee was a pale feminine man from the flat below . . . He informed me that he was in the ‘artistic game’ and I gathered later that he was a photographer and had made the dim enlargement of Mrs. Wilson’s mother which hovered like an ectoplasm on the wall” (*GG* 34). Mrs. McKee, further, is “shrill, languid, handsome and horrible” (*GG* 34). These people are very much a part of their society; not only do they have vulgar tastes, but they also have an interest in being together and partaking in some of the more conventional aspects of society. Gossip is an activity of conventional people, and Catherine shows herself to be not above such habits: “ ‘Well, they say he’s a nephew or a cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm’s. That’s where all his [Gatsby’s] money comes from.’ ‘Really?’ She nodded. ‘I’m scared of him. I’d hate to have him get anything on me’ ” (*GG* 37). However, it is obvious as well that Catherine is able to overcome her fear of Gatsby to partake in his flashy parties, for she “was down there at a party about a month ago” (*GG* 36). There is a certain amount of admiration for Gatsby on the part of the decadent milieu, and Catherine is no different from the wealthy in this manner. Keeping in mind Catherine’s gossip, and in reference to the people who gossip about Gatsby at his parties, Langman states that “The people who talk of Gatsby this way aren’t horrified, of course, or disgusted; they are thrilled. What they attribute to him

¹⁵ Lawrence Jay Dessner notes that Catherine “having plucked and redrawn her eyebrows, finds only confusion in her distortion for aesthetic effect” (180).

corresponds to their own inward desires and admirations: they admire, or thrill to, violence, ruthlessness, lawlessness” (42), if it results in financial success. No matter how afraid they are of Gatsby, they maintain their admiration. Catherine goes on to show further the lack of decency within this group, including people such as Tom: “ ‘Neither of them can stand the person they’re married to.’ ‘Can’t they?’ ‘Can’t *stand* them.’ She looked at Myrtle and then at Tom. ‘What I say is, why go on living with them if they can’t stand them? If I was them I’d get a divorce and get married to each other right away’ ” (GG 37). In this world, affairs are deemed acceptable, even encouraged. We know from Catherine that “ ‘She [Myrtle] really ought to get away from him,’ . . . ‘They’ve been living over that garage for eleven years. And Tom’s the first sweetie she ever had’ ” (GG 39). Catherine tells Nick that Daisy is “a Catholic and they don’t believe in divorce” (GG 38), while Nick is “a little shocked at the elaborateness of the lie” (GG 38), for “Daisy was not a Catholic” (GG 38). Lies are common in this set; affairs, vulgarity, and pretensions are common here as well. Catherine even believes, or wants to believe, that Myrtle and Tom will get married, but this is not a possibility for Tom.

Mrs. McKee shows herself to be easily as vulgar as Myrtle when she reveals her anti-Semitism. She states, “ ‘I almost made a mistake too,’ she declared vigorously. ‘I almost married a little kyke who’d been after me for years. I knew he was below me. Everybody kept saying to me, “Lucille, that man’s way below you!” But if I hadn’t met Chester he’d of got me sure’ ” (GG 38). Mrs. McKee may well believe, just as Myrtle and the others do, that she has standards, but her standards are totally false. All of the obsession with getting ahead, going to parties, living a rich and

wild life, and being in the right “set” shows that these people are not self-reliant. No matter what, these people depend on conventions of all sorts to live their lives.

Even the atmosphere in the room becomes steadily more confusing and more hectic. Atmosphere is important in the novel, for the characters reflect the corrupt times. As Coleman notes, “This mood of overcrowding and crudeness grows stronger as Nick gets drunker and Myrtle takes up more and more of the space in her apartment” (217). Certainly, there is a “furious confusion of Myrtle’s party” (Coleman 218). As the night wears on, “The little dog was sitting on the table looking with blind eyes through the smoke and from time to time groaning faintly. People disappeared, reappeared, made plans to go somewhere, and then lost each other, searched for each other, found each other a few feet away” (*GG* 41).¹⁶ After Tom breaks Myrtle’s nose in an argument, “there were bloody towels upon the bathroom floor and women’s voices scolding, and high over the confusion a long broken wail of pain. Mr. McKee awoke from his doze and started in a daze toward the door” (*GG* 41). Further, “When he [Mr. McKee] had gone halfway he turned around and stared at the scene--his wife and Catherine scolding and consoling as they stumbled here and there among the crowded furniture with articles of aid, and the despairing figure on the couch bleeding fluently and trying to spread a copy of ‘Town Tattle’ over the tapestry scenes of Versailles” (*GG* 42). The crowded figures in the crowded room with all the confusion and violence completely differ from Thoreau’s quiet and minimally furnished home in *Walden*. The strange scene in which Nick and Mr. McKee are alone together in Mr. McKee’s room adds to the confusion and the fact that no relationships are solid between people in this

¹⁶ As Victor Doyno notes, “The title ‘Brook’n Bridge’ occurs just after Tom has broken Myrtle’s nose, and may be a punning reference to this incident and thus to the leitmotif of violence in the novel” (102).

world.¹⁷ Here, W. J. Harvey's comment regarding the angry wives and their husbands at Gatsby's party (GG 56) that there is a "rootlessness and transience of these people, the lack of any stable relationship" (78) applies.

Gatsby's parties demonstrate that the equally vulgar rich people in this society are dependent on the corrupt society in which they live.¹⁸ Further, "A very few, such as Gatsby, stand out by their wealth; his hospitality secures him a hold on many peoples' memories, but Fitzgerald is quick to point up the emptiness of this: Klipspringer cares more about his lost tennis shoes than Gatsby's death" (Lewis 47). Gatsby's parties are flashy, large, and vulgar, but they impress everyone, rich and poor alike. Nick tells the reader that "In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars . . . On week-ends his Rolls-Royce became an omnibus, bearing parties to and from the city" (GG 43). In Gatsby's mansion there are "buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors d'oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs . . . In the main hall a bar with real brass rail was set up, and stocked with gins and liquors with cordials so long forgotten that most of his female guests were too young to know one from another" (GG 44). Consumption of these liquors was illegal, of course, during Prohibition, a fact that bothers neither Gatsby nor his guests. The sheer extravagance of this society is

¹⁷ Keath Fraser asks the question, "Is there in the novel a cultivated ambiguity, such as that of the McKee episode, which flirts with, but never answers the question of Nick Carraway's sexuality, because Nick refuses to tell us the whole truth about himself?" (141). Fraser addresses issues of sexuality in the novel, also noting that "The highly-sexed Myrtle is childless; and her husband's impotence, if that is the reason for her constant desire to escape him, seems suitably complemented by the wasteland of ashes in which he dwells. Also childless, as far as we know, is Mrs. McKee, whose husband's assiduous use of his camera lens since their wedding appears to suggest a clear substitute for sex with his wife" (143-144).

¹⁸ Coleman notes that "In Gatsby's universe, a driver can emerge from a crash not only unscathed but oblivious to the fact that he has shorn a wheel of his car . . . At Myrtle's party, where the conditions of

exemplified in Gatsby's parties, and the people who arrive demonstrate the society's corruption, for the guests desire to be near him only because of his wealth. We are told that "already the halls and salons and verandas are gaudy with primary colors" and "The bar is in full swing and floating rounds of cocktails permeate the garden outside until the air is alive with chatter and laughter and casual innuendo and introductions forgotten on the spot and enthusiastic meetings between women who never knew each other's names" (*GG* 44). The crowd may be of a different type from Myrtle's New York set, but nonetheless there is vulgarity here as well. There is no doubt that the cocktails are the culprits behind this atmosphere, and there is no certainty that anyone would find companionship at this party if alcohol were not involved. For example, "Suddenly one of these gypsies in trembling opal seizes a cocktail out of the air, dumps it down for courage and moving her hands like a Frisco dances out alone on the canvas platform . . . The party has begun" (*GG* 45). It seems that the guests rid themselves of discomfort by becoming brave with alcohol, and Nick obviously feels the need to be around other people: "I found it necessary to attach myself to someone before I should begin to address cordial remarks to the passers-by" (*GG* 46). Further, Owl Eyes, for example, has " 'been drunk for about a week' " (*GG* 50). The excess of the party is shown by the "champagne" being "served in glasses bigger than finger bowls" (*GG* 51), and the "people . . . doing 'stunts' all over the garden while happy vacuous bursts of laughter rose toward the summer sky" (*GG* 51). Toward the end of the night, however, "One of the girls in yellow was playing the piano and beside her stood a tall red haired young lady from a famous chorus, engaged in song. She had drunk a quantity of champagne

nature can be blurred but never overcome, her very real blood will leave lasting stains on unmistakable furniture" (222).

and during the course of the song she had decided ineptly that everything was very very sad” (*GG* 55). Further, “Whenever there was a pause in the song she filled it with gasping sobs and then took up the lyric again in a quavering soprano. The tears coursed down her cheeks--not freely, however, for when they came into contact with her heavily beaded eyelashes they assumed an inky color, and pursued the rest of their way in slow black rivulets” (*GG* 56). It is easy to see that the guests at Gatsby’s party are completely unable to exist independently of each other, for all of these people are similarly trying to become a part of the rich set. Harvey notes that at “the end of the first of Gatsby’s parties”, “The glamour and enchantment . . . has here dissolved . . . the scene is closed by a dismal return to the world of sober reality, or more precisely, to the disenchanted world of the hangover” (77). Even when Nick leaves this party, he sees a car in the ditch: “A man in a long duster had dismounted from the wreck and now stood in the middle of the road looking from the car to the tire to the observers in a pleasant puzzled way. ‘See!’ he explained. ‘It went in the ditch.’ The fact was infinitely astonishing to him” (*GG* 58). Nick realizes that this man is “the late patron of Gatsby’s party” (*GG* 58), Owl Eyes. When Nick asks Owl Eyes what happened, Owl Eyes responds, “ ‘Don’t ask me . . . I know very little about driving--next to nothing. It happened, and that’s all I know’ ” (*GG* 59). The careless attitude of the people at this party, to say nothing of a drunken accident, says much about the atmosphere in this society.¹⁹ Again, as with Myrtle’s set, all of the figures in this society

¹⁹ As Lehan (*Limits*) notes, “The moral carelessness of the novel is in great part carried by the motif of careless driving, suggesting the rise of power (here embodied in the machine) without a sense of responsibility or of human welfare. Jordan Baker (named after two automobiles) becomes the embodiment of such carelessness until that role is taken over by Daisy, who runs over Myrtle . . . and by Tom, who allows another man to die for a crime he never committed” (33).

want to be a part of this milieu. As Gatsby's second party illustrates, minor characters are still as distasteful as before. A character, Miss Baedeker, exemplifies the drunken behaviour common to the people at Gatsby's parties: " 'Anything I hate is to get my head stuck in a pool,' mumbled Miss Baedeker. 'They almost drowned me once over in New Jersey.' 'Then you ought to leave it alone,' countered Doctor Civet. 'Speak for yourself!' cried Miss Baedeker violently. 'Your hand shakes. I wouldn't let you operate on me!' " (GG 113). The confusion and carelessness in the minor characters perfectly set the background for Gatsby and the major players in the novel.

As a typical product of Jazz Age vulgarity and brutality, and as one of the major characters, Tom Buchanan epitomizes many characteristics found within the world of *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald told his editor Maxwell Perkins in 1924 that "My first instinct after your letter was to let him [Gatsby] go + [sic] have Tom Buchanan dominate the book (I suppose he's the best character I've done" (Brucoli, *A Life in Letters* 91). Tom certainly has a domineering quality, which is meant to add to his cruelty. Nick tells us that Tom Buchanan has a "cruel body" (GG 11). Words such as "power", "aggressive", "hard", and "dominance" (GG 11) are used in the novel in reference to Tom. Maxwell Perkins, Fitzgerald's editor, states in a letter to Fitzgerald, "I would know Tom Buchanan if I met him on the street and avoid him" (Brucoli, *A Life in Letters* 87). Tom's life has been superficially enviable, as he was in his youth "a national figure in a way, one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterwards savours of anti-climax" (GG 10). We are also told that "his family were enormously wealthy--even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach--but now he'd left Chicago and come east in such a fashion

that rather took your breath away” (*GG* 10). Tom, being careless or “free” with money, is equally irresponsible morally.²⁰ Fitzgerald, as Matthew Bruccoli tells us, “was an old fashioned moralist with the conventional standards of conduct. He was an intrusive author in the sense that he was a storyteller who commented on the story as he told it” (*Fitzgerald and Hemingway* 11). Tom has an element of power that overwhelms. Tom is always portrayed “in a permanently warlike attitude, like that of a predator even in a moment of apparent ease such as a stroll along the street” (Lena 24). This brutality enforces his dominance and his potential for cruelty. His freedom with other people’s bodies and plans supports the accuracy of Nick’s description of him as a puppet master.²¹ “Before I could reply that he was my neighbor dinner was announced; wedging his tense arm imperatively under mine Tom Buchanan compelled me from the room as though he were moving a checker to another square” (*GG* 16). When examining Tom, one begins to see a pattern in his physical behaviour. Daisy looks down at her finger, and complains to her audience: “ ‘I hurt it.’ We all looked--the knuckle was black and blue. ‘You did it, Tom,’ she said accusingly. ‘I know you didn’t mean to but you *did* do it. That’s what I get for marrying a brute of a man’ ” (*GG* 16). Tom is not gentle with other human beings, even with his own wife. Milton Hindus concurs, arguing that “Side by side with this aspect of Tom’s character is

²⁰ Alberto Lena’s perceptive article regarding Tom’s character sheds some light on Tom’s attitudes: “His social exterior, which primarily consists of an awareness of his own wealth and the respectability that he derives from it, provides him with a fixed identity . . . In many ways, Tom Buchanan embodies the decadence of the upper classes” (20). Malcolm Cowley adds that “Tom Buchanan is wealth brutalized by selfishness and arrogance” (71).

²¹ Richard Lehan’s perceptive chapter on Tom shows that Tom “exudes a kind of authority as he ushers people about as well as forcing moral pronouncements upon them” (*Limits* 80). However, Robert Emmet Long sees that “Buchanan is not complicated; he is seen in the clear outline of a few characteristics--his arrogance and intimidating physical strength . . . That Buchanan regards other people as counters to be moved about at his will . . . is a comment upon his assumptions of class” (146).

another element deriving from his physical prowess and manifesting itself in his penchant for pushing people around It is characteristic of Tom, too, that he is forever interrupting people's conversations[he] reveals himself to be completely common, mean, and vulgar" (39-40). Tom's brutality, of course, typifies the brutality of his society generally.

Daisy is not really the victimized soul she would like to portray herself as being; she is, along with Jordan Baker, apathetic and vapid, and she is in no way as valuable or worthy a goal as Gatsby feels that she is.²² She is capable of brutality herself, and seems lacking in conscience as well. She does not resist corruption. One cannot hold Daisy's horrible marriage against her, but her immobility is a product of her own lack of values.²³ Rich and bored, she is so lacking in true self-reliance that she cannot truly commit herself to anyone or anything. She is dependent on this society for her validation, yet her wealth allows only a false independence. Emerson would place Daisy in the category of materialist, one who "respects sensible masses, Society social art, and luxury, every establishment" ("Self-Reliance" 94). Berman observes that "Daisy Fay Buchanan's languorshows the life of the lotos eaters" (*Fitzgerald* 62).²⁴ Her emotions are founded in and defined against her extreme boredom and flighty

²² Daisy is a character that most critics agree on. Andrew Dillon asserts that "Daisy fails every test of character" (59). Daisy is generally seen as a selfish, careless individual, "circumscribed by commercial purposes. White, weightless and seemingly 'immutable,' she is an object of consumption" (Godden 357).

²³ Susan Resneck Parr claims that Daisy "is morally indifferent and emotionally dead" (673). Lehan states that "a close reading of the text reveals that Daisy is . . . both disingenuous and theatrical, even showing how Tom's mannerisms have become hers" (Lehan, *Limits* 75).

²⁴ Stern also refers to "rich, fragile languor" (202) in talking about the Buchanans' house. The ultimate conclusion regarding Daisy is that she is definitely lacking in an ability to move out of her situation. Daisy, as Roger Lewis argues, "sees purposelessness as characterizing her whole life" (50), although Daisy is not, as Lewis also argues, a person who "wants to act" (50). The best description of Daisy is given by Parr, who sees Daisy as "an unthinking dependent woman" (669), and that "Daisy's first remark

desires. She is certainly a person of gestures and poses, few of them genuine; Nick tells us, “she laughed again, as if she said something very witty, and held my hand for a moment, looking up into my face, promising that there was no one in the world she so much wanted to see. That was a way she had” (*GG* 13). Daisy’s contrived affectations imply that she is a woman who is well aware of her actions and their effects. She abstains from making any concrete decisions, as evident in her response to Jordan’s proposal to plan something for the “longest day of the year”: “ ‘All right,’ said Daisy. ‘What’ll we plan? She turned to me helplessly. ‘What do people plan?’ ” (*GG* 16). Affected and disingenuous, Daisy’s words are inconsequential, and they indicate an inability to see the significance of actions and relationships. Even Daisy’s mocking response to Tom’s bigoted comment concerning racial purity is not the product of conviction: “ ‘We’ve got to beat them down,’ whispered Daisy, winking ferociously toward the fervent sun” (*GG* 18). In fact, she believes in nothing. Daisy’s private conversation with Nick shows her need to view even her own life as a meaningless accident. She tells Nick that she perceives her situation to be negative: “ ‘Well, I’ve had a very bad time, Nick, and I’m pretty cynical about everything’ ” (*GG* 21). She goes on to add, “ ‘You see I think everything’s terrible anyway,’ she went on in a convinced way. ‘Everybody thinks so--the most advanced people. And I *know*. I’ve been everywhere and seen everything and done everything.’ Her eyes flashed around her in a defiant way, rather like Tom’s, and she laughed with thrilling scorn. ‘Sophisticated--God, I’m sophisticated!’ ” (*GG* 22). Even her cynicism is contrived, for there is no evidence that she has a strong desire to change her situation. As Susan

to Nick when they meet is a further variation on this motif that she is part of the living dead” (669). Parr further notes that “he [Nick] portrays Daisy as sharing both his notion of female powerlessness and his

Resneck Parr comments, “Daisy . . . lacks . . . the ability to be self-reliant which are necessary prerequisites for independent moral choice” (666).

Even in Daisy’s relationships with Gatsby and Tom one sees this apathy and absence of self-reliance. The day before her wedding to Tom, Daisy is “drunk as a monkey” (*GG* 81) with a letter from Jay Gatsby in her hand. Daisy’s apathy seems to disappear when she begins to resist this wedding: “Say ‘Daisy’s change’ her mine!’ ” (*GG* 81). Then, in the face of opposition, “she didn’t say another word” (*GG* 81), and the “Next day at five o’clock she married Tom Buchanan without so much as a shiver and started off on a three month’s trip to the South Seas” (*GG* 81).²⁵ Further, Daisy has no courage or ability to face the future: “ ‘What’ll we do with ourselves this afternoon,’ cried Daisy, ‘and the day after that, and the next thirty years?’ ” (*GG* 125). Daisy refuses to make choices to benefit her independence. Her apathy has reached a critical point.

Jordan Baker is another character who Nick sees as being dishonest: “She was incurably dishonest. She wasn’t able to endure being at a disadvantage, and given this unwillingness I suppose she had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was very young” (*GG* 63). Elsewhere he informs the reader of Jordan and her lies: “I had heard some story of her too, a critical, unpleasant story, but what it was I had forgotten long ago” (*GG* 23). He details this “unpleasant story”, which deals with Jordan’s “first big golf tournament [where] there was a row that nearly reached the newspapers--a suggestion

acceptance of deception as an appropriate way of dealing with that powerlessness” (667).

²⁵ Maybe part of her reasoning in marrying Tom lies in her “version of the dream that applies to women, that marriage to a successful man is not the symbol of success but success itself” (Parr 667). However, Parr sees that Daisy does not acknowledge the “emptiness of her marriage and her life and repeatedly chooses the security she thinks that Tom’s wealth offers her” (669). She consistently involves herself in a “failure to assume responsibility for herself” (Parr 671).

that she had moved her ball from a bad lie in the semi-final round. The thing approached the proportion of a scandal--then died away. A caddy retracted his statement and the only other witness admitted that he might have been mistaken" (*GG* 62). Nick's opinions also come from Jordan's lie concerning a car at a party: "When we were on a house party together up in Warwick, she left a borrowed car out in the rain with the top down, and then lied about it" (*GG* 62). Jordan does know that certain things are cruel and wrong, but she, like Daisy, does not resist the world in which she lives except through her looks of scepticism and distaste.

In fact, Jordan Baker exemplifies a spiritual emptiness that rival Daisy's own. We see her first when she is sitting with Daisy on the couch in Tom's house: "She was extended full length at her end of the divan, completely motionless and with her chin raised a little as if she were balancing something on it which was quite likely to fall. If she saw me out of the corner of her eyes she gave no hint of it--indeed I was almost surprised into murmuring an apology for having disturbed her by coming in" (*GG* 13). She does not add any true contrast to any of the other characters except in her supposed "self sufficiency", according to Nick: "At any rate Miss Baker's lips fluttered, and she nodded at me almost imperceptibly and then quickly tipped her head back again Again a sort of apology rose to my lips. Almost any exhibition of complete self sufficiency draws a stunned tribute from me" (*GG* 13).²⁶ Again, we must be critical of Nick's evaluation of Jordan. Jordan is, just like Daisy, bored and snobbish.²⁷

²⁶ R.W. Stallman notes that "Nothing in the book has self-sufficiency, not even Gatsby" (qtd. in Tredell 64).

²⁷ Robert Emmet Long observes that "Her appearance and manner have, in fact, much to do with her money . . . there is no suggestion that she has ever had to make commitments, or to shoulder any burdens" (148). This idea works with our knowledge of Jordan's attitudes and actions. Jordan's "aloofness" (Long 148) adds to the fact that "her wealth acts as insulation, [and] keeps life from touching

Snobbery, of course, is the antithesis of self-reliance, based as it is on an acceptance of society's values. Jordan accepts society, and she does not question the values or the actions to which it subscribes. When Jordan speaks, her attitude expresses apathy: “ ‘We ought to plan something,’ yawned Miss Baker, sitting down at the table as if she were getting into bed” (*GG* 16). Jordan always seems as though she is being dragged through each life circumstance against her will, but she still makes no attempt to resist. She answers to Nick “absently” (*GG* 47) at Gatsby's party, and this manner remains consistent with Jordan's image. Her good-bye to Nick at the end of Gatsby's party is flighty and absentminded to say the least: “She yawned gracefully in my face. ‘Please come and see me . . . Phone book . . . Under the name of Mrs. Sigourney Howard . . . My aunt . . .’ She was hurrying off as she talked--her brown hand waved a jaunty salute as she melted into her party at the door” (*GG* 57). She follows the crowd just as Tom and Daisy follow the crowd.

Dishonesty reigns supreme in this society, almost all of the characters engaging in some sort of dishonest activity. Tom's illicit relationship with Myrtle Wilson is introduced to the reader by Jordan Baker, who announces to Nick that “ ‘Tom's got some woman in New York’ ” (*GG* 19). Tom's unfaithfulness to Daisy is long standing, his having betrayed Daisy before. As a man of wealth and power, Tom takes advantage of situations in his life not because he is self-reliant but because he is egotistical, selfish, and literally a “bold sensualist”. As Myrtle is Tom's mistress, she is treated as such. Their relationship is definitely flawed, cemented as it is only by sex and money. With

her deeply . . . she is denied moral growth” (Long 148). C.W.E Bigsby notes that “Jordan Baker . . . lacks any kind of moral code” (93).

Myrtle, Tom satisfies her just enough so that she does not complain.²⁸ Myrtle gets what she wants, but she is not truly connected to Tom in any other way. Nor does Tom have any understanding of love. Tom, in confrontation with Gatsby when the group travels to New York, claims that “ ‘what’s more, I love Daisy too. Once in a while I go off on a spree and make a fool of myself, but I always come back, and in my heart I love her all the time’ ” (GG 138). His false standards, his cruelty and insecurity, not to mention his dishonesty, govern his life.

Daisy appears to have Jay Gatsby as her inspiration, her supposed love for Gatsby having remained all these years, even though she has been married to Tom Buchanan the entire time. Daisy is obviously pleased to see Gatsby again, and “her throat, full of aching, grieving beauty, told only of her unexpected joy” (GG 94), but much can be said about her capacity for love when she can be married to Tom and apparently love him, and claim to love Gatsby as well, a man she does not even truly know. When the confrontation occurs between Tom and Gatsby, and Gatsby asks her to “ ‘tell him the truth--that you never loved him--and it’s all wiped out forever,’ She hesitatedshe realized at last what she was doing--and as though she had never, all along, intended to do anything at all. But it was done now. It was too late. “I never loved him,” she said, with perceptible reluctance” (GG 139). Her dishonesty also comes into play when she kills Myrtle Wilson in a hit and run car accident. Gatsby tells Nick, “ ‘Daisy stepped on it. I tried to make her stop but she couldn’t so I pulled on the emergency brake. Then she fell over into my lap and I drove on’ ” (GG 151). Here, Daisy’s response to what she has done is plainly cowardly and disturbingly

²⁸ John Lucaks regards Tom as being “a veritable villain who is somewhat overdrawn: a heartless, rather than a mindless American” (239). Robert Emmet Long is among these critics who view Tom as being a

callous. She does not even try to take responsibility for her own actions, in this case the death of Myrtle. When Nick sees Tom and Daisy through the window into their kitchen, he sees them “sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table with a plate of cold fried chicken between them and two bottles of ale. He was talking intently across the table at her and in his earnestness his hand had fallen upon and covered her own. Once in a while she looked up at him and nodded in agreement” (GG 152).²⁹ Daisy simply re-inserts herself into her position as a rich society wife, and she seems to have no visible second thoughts for Gatsby, the man she supposedly loved so intensely, and the woman she has killed, when she and Tom leave town.

Nor is Nick immune to this society’s dishonesty. Nick defines himself in the following way: “I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known” (GG 64), the novel makes plain that this is far from the truth.³⁰ Elizabeth Preston rightly states that “*When a selfconscious [sic] homodiegetic narrator asserts his own honesty, an implied reader responds by questioning the narrator’s honesty*” (sic, 157).³¹ Nick consistently lies to himself, especially concerning Gatsby’s and Daisy’s value. His complicity in Tom’s and Daisy’s illicit relationships is even a form of his dishonesty. Inviting Daisy

“figure of chronic unfaithfulness” (122).

²⁹ Lehan (*Limits*) points out that “if Tom knows that Daisy was driving Gatsby’s car when he sends Wilson to Gatsby’s house, then Tom kills Gatsby as clearly as if he pulled the trigger himself. If he does not know, then Daisy is equally complicit in Gatsby’s death” (78). If the latter is the case, Daisy is implicated in two deaths.

³⁰ Surprisingly, many critics have taken Nick’s self-evaluation at face value. Ramesh Misra states that “Fitzgerald . . . carefully establishes Nick as a sympathetic listener at the very beginning of the novel” (18). Perosa refers to Nick’s “incorrupt honesty” (71), coinciding with critics such as Henry Dan Piper who believe that “he has been transformed into an alert, thoughtful observer” (140). Milton Stern argues that “Nick is indeed a reliable narrator” (176). Andrew Dillon reveals his opinion that Nick is “that balanced and honest self we hope we are” (50).

³¹ She does, however, relate her own opinion regarding Nick’s reliability in a detailed discussion of narrative in her article.

to come for tea at his cottage, he warns her not to “ ‘bring Tom’ ” (*GG* 88) and plays a role in her affair with Gatsby. Nick calls himself honest, yet he hypocritically engages with these people, all the while claiming to be disgusted with them. Admitting that he is “confused and a little disgusted” (*GG* 24) when he leaves Daisy and Tom’s house for the first time, he nevertheless returns again to their home and company. Though he states that he is “inclined to reserve all judgements” (*GG* 5), we can see, through examination of his relationships with the main characters in the novel, that Nick never hesitates to judge. He claims, for one thing, that Gatsby “represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn” (*GG* 6), which is surely a judgement. However, this capacity for judging others should not be taken to mean that Nick possesses strong personal values and standards. Donaldson sees that Nick “judges and condemns, practically everyone he meets in the novel” (“The Trouble With Nick” 132), adding that the inconsistency of these judgements reveals an insecurity in Nick’s own values.

In his dealings with Gatsby, Nick parleys between Daisy and Gatsby, sharing secrets and making deals. Richard Godden goes into great detail regarding Nick’s character, and he notes that “Gatsby is hiring a pimp [for Daisy and Gatsby] to make a ‘gonnection’ ” (347). In dealing with Tom, Nick keeps all of his secrets for him and his mistress. One must continually remember that Nick’s dishonesty is the extreme opposite of self-reliance. In fact, in his dealings, Nick is definitely a man completely dependent on others to boost his own image of himself. We see that when he gets drunk along with Gatsby’s guests, Nick’s reliability is not believable: “the scene had changed before my eyes into something significant, elemental and profound” (*GG* 50). Lehan notes that “it is not insignificant that Nick tells us throughout that his vision is

sometimes blurred and distorted. In a world without a moral center such distortions are perhaps inevitable” (*Limits* 32). An alcoholic reverie is the extent of Nick’s ability to see the profound meaning in life. In terms of *Gatsby*, for example, Nick’s unreliability is shown in his conversation with Gatsby after Myrtle’s death: “ ‘What are you doing?’ I inquired. ‘Just standing here, old sport.’ Somehow that seemed a despicable occupation. For all I knew he was going to rob the house in a moment” (*GG* 150). Not much later, Nick is Gatsby’s number one fan: “ ‘They’re a rotten crowd,’ I shouted, across the lawn. ‘You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together.’ I’ve always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him, because I disapproved of him from beginning to end. First he nodded politely, and then his face broke into that radiant and understanding smile, as if we’d been in cahoots on that fact all the time” (*GG* 162). It is here that we can see Nick is never truly sure what he thinks at all. He has been lying to himself the entire time, for he hypocritically wants to be a part of *Gatsby* and his world while reserving the right simultaneously to criticize and in the process preserve a sense of his own integrity, at least to his own justification.

Materialism takes a dominant position in this novel. Most of the major characters are preoccupied with money, what it provides, and the need for it. In Tom’s case, despite all the power and freedom such wealth should give him, he shows repeatedly that he is not at all self-reliant. Even though Tom always seems self-assured, in control, and powerful, his self-validation comes entirely from the status his possessions and money have given him. Tom’s house, his treatment of others, and his own insecurities all reveal an actual dependence on society and its materialistic values.³²

³² Moyer notes that “The Buchanans, standing for the modern American upper class, embody a materialism which is totally cynical, undirected by idealism or transcendental hope” (221).

Tom's house is large, rich, and beautiful; the reader is introduced to Tom "in riding clothes . . . standing with his legs apart on the front porch" (*GG* 11). In striking contrast to Thoreau, as Donaldson notes, extreme importance is placed in this society on houses: "In a culture where pecuniary emulation predominates, the single most important object by which to declare one's status is the house . . . Fitzgerald masterfully discriminates between Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby . . . on the basis of the very different houses they occupy on Long Island" ("Possessions" 204). Everyone knows the influence and power that houses can have, and this society is no different.

Although Daisy Buchanan rarely thinks about money literally, she is married to one of the wealthiest young men in America, and Tom's wealth was doubtless a motivating factor in her decision to marry him. In fact, "the day before the wedding he [Tom] gave her a string of pearls valued at three hundred and fifty thousand dollars" (*GG* 80), and after Daisy's drunken episode where she expresses some resistance to her marriage to Tom, "the pearls were around her neck and the incident was over" (*GG* 81). The acceptance of the pearls shows that Daisy has succumbed to the temptations of wealth, even though she believes herself to be "in love" with someone else. As far as her feelings for Gatsby are concerned, his wealth is obviously important to her, for she does not feign her excitement when shown his house: " 'That huge place *there?*' she cried pointing" (*GG* 95). Her excited response indicates to the reader that she is easily impressed by what Gatsby's wealth could offer her.

Myrtle and Wilson are just as materialistic, although they are at the poorer end of the economic spectrum. Myrtle wants nothing more than to be rich and Wilson relies on Tom's advice and business to feel strong and capable. Wilson is considered to be

useless and unimportant, and the “white ashen dust [which] veiled his dark suit and his pale hair as it veiled everything else in the vicinity--except his wife” (*GG* 30) makes him appear to fade from existence. His character is seen as “a ‘spiritless man, anaemic’ and ‘dim and already crumbling’ ” (Stern 226). In Wilson, one sees the appropriateness of Thoreau’s claim that “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” (*Walden* 5). In apparent contrast with her husband, our first view of Myrtle is that of a woman “in her middle thirties, and faintly stout, but she carried her surplus flesh sensuously as some women can. Her face, above a spotted dress of dark blue crepe-de-chine, contained no facet or gleam of beauty but there was an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering” (*GG* 29-30). Myrtle is almost always described in terms of her body: “In that strictly tangible world she dominates by the significance of her body and the intensity of her desire” (Coleman 217). Myrtle is another sensualist, or according to Emerson, a “materialist” (“The Transcendentalist” 94). Myrtle, by the same token, wants to be, and feel, rich. She puts on wealthy airs although she is not wealthy at all; she is simply the mistress to a wealthy man. Victor Doyno notes that “Myrtle is a socially and morally limited character who acted in an understandable way because of her romantic expectation” (98). However, she is no more a true romantic than Gatsby. She depends on Tom for her self-worth because she feels trapped with Wilson. However, Donaldson notes that “She is, for Tom, a possession to be played with, fondled, and in due course ignored” (“Possessions” 193). Myrtle’s goal in being with Tom is to elevate her status as she conceives it. She is treated badly, yet she remains with her abusive lover to stay close to the status that she desires. Long is correct in stating that Myrtle has “dim aspirations and baseless

pretensions” (154), her “course and vulgar aspiration” (Stern 227) being rooted in greed and materialism. Interestingly, Myrtle also relies on clothing to make her feel complete and important: “Mrs. Wilson had changed her costume some time before . . . With the influence of the dress her personality had also undergone a change. The intense vitality that had been so remarkable in the garage was converted into impressive hauteur. Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected” (*GG* 35). Not unlike Gatsby and his shirts, clothing, for Myrtle, makes her feel powerful and rich when she is not. The reader can see that her sense of worth is modeled on others, and her imitation negates self-reliance. As Stern puts it, “so too in Myrtle’s life there is the same wistful yearning, the same misplaced power and energy that characterizes Tom’s as much as it does Gatsby’s world” (224). Myrtle may have “vibrant passion” (Stern 226), but none of her potential is recognized or used. Myrtle admits she was originally impressed with Tom’s image: “ ‘He had on a dress suit and patent leather shoes and I couldn’t keep my eyes off him . . . When we came into the station he was next to me and his white shirt front pressed against my arm’ ” (*GG* 40). Her desire for Tom originates in her fascination with the trappings of wealth.

For his part, Nick’s values are similarly suspect. He is simply as money-grubbing as anyone in the novel, a fact that must be constantly kept in mind, for he is the man through whom we view the other characters.³³ Adding to Nick’s materialism is his preoccupation with his career in the bond business. He is concerned

³³ C.W.E Bigsby observes that “the reader’s acknowledgement of the immorality of Nick’s values and his unreliability as a neutral observer is crucial” (92). Robert Lee concurs, arguing that “Nick’s unreliability needs to be seen as utterly intrinsic to Fitzgerald’s imagining of the story” (43). Donaldson devotes an entire article to Nick’s unreliability, calling Nick “a snob” (“The Trouble With Nick” 131) who “is not entirely honest about himself and [who] frequently misunderstands others” (131). Milton Hindus also calls Nick a snob, “a self-righteous puritan” (40).

with making money, and his greed becomes quite evident in his descriptions of his daily activities: “Most of the time I worked. In the early morning the sun threw my shadow westward as I hurried down the white chasms of lower New York to the Probity Trust. I knew the other clerks and young bond-salesmen by their first names and lunched with them in dark crowded restaurants on little pig sausages and mashed potatoes and coffee” (*GG* 61). Nick also spends time on his plans and investments: “then I went upstairs to the library and studied investments and securities for a conscientious hour” (*GG* 61). That such goals give him life and purpose says much about Nick. Self-reliance has no room for purely materialistic goals. Nick not only depends on these things, but he is also quite enamoured of conventional society: “I began to like New York, the racy, adventurous feel of it at night and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye” (*GG* 61). Nick admits being drawn to the very world Thoreau would reject. Nick states, “[after the war] I decided to go east and learn the bond business. Everybody I knew was in the bond business so I supposed it could support one more single man” (*GG* 7). The self-reliant person certainly would not, in the eyes of Emerson and Thoreau, choose a path simply because it is well trodden. Nick clearly shows his materialism in his reading choices: “I bought a dozen volumes on banking and credit and investment securities and they stood on my shelf in red and gold like new money from the mint, promising to unfold the shining secrets that only Midas and Morgan and Maecenas knew” (*GG* 8). Midas seems to be the ideal God for the materialistic culture that Nick and the others inhabit. There is no better way to fit in to this society than to make money, use money, and idealize money even in itself as a life form. And, there is no better way to identify this society as the decadent,

immoral society that lacks in self-reliance than through its brutality, vapidness, dishonesty, and materialism.

Chapter 3

The “Bold Sensualist”: Jay Gatsby as a Perverse Parody of Self-Reliance

Initially, Gatsby appears to contrast with the other characters. Critics such as Harvey can see that “this is a society which is flippant and cynical, gay and hedonistic, but definitely not intense in its feeling for anyone or anything; as such, it contrasts with the real intensity of the outsider who is its host, with the passion of Gatsby’s dream of Daisy” (78). While Harvey correctly asserts the nature of this society, there is some doubt as to both the legitimacy of Gatsby’s “passion” and the degree to which he really contrasts with his guests, as this chapter will illustrate. Gatsby himself requires little introduction; his ostentation and pomp introduce him before the reader has even met him. The image with which we are presented, as described by Nick, is a romantic view of Gatsby: “he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and far as I was I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward--and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock” (*GG* 25-26). His manner, appearance, and actions seem to reveal a man who is truly obsessed with aspiration. Later, Nick focuses on Gatsby’s supposed unique and misunderstood personality, as seen in his fascination with Gatsby’s smile when they first meet: “He smiled understandingly--much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced--or seemed to face--the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible

prejudice in your favor. It understood you just so far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself” (*GG* 53). Plainly Gatsby is a man of significant personal charisma, charm, and apparent strength.

Gatsby appears to believe in himself, and this in itself would seem to speak well of him. Initially, Nick “could see nothing sinister about him” (*GG* 54). Through Nick, we are given a positive sense of Gatsby. It is true that Nick portrays Gatsby in a romantic manner. The fact that Gatsby is “never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand” (*GG* 68) at the very least suggests there is a potential for meaningful achievements. Further, Gatsby’s “restlessness” (*GG* 68) makes his dreams appear not only possible, but within his grasp, for he always appears to be searching. Gatsby tells Nick that he “ ‘seemed to bear an enchanted life’ ” (*GG* 70). Gatsby’s presentation of apparent proof of his time in war--the medal that reads “For Valour Extraordinary” (*GG* 71)--leads the reader to think, along with Nick, that Gatsby’s story is true: “it was all true. I saw the skins of tigers flaming in his palace on the Grand Canal; I saw him opening a chest of rubies to ease, with their crimson-lighted depths, the gnawings of his broken heart” (*GG* 71). At this point, our sense of Gatsby as hopeful and brave is initially plausible, for he does have a medal, it has “an authentic look” (*GG* 71), and it identifies the recipient as courageous. What more can we ask of a “self-reliant” figure in the materialistic twenties? Of course, not only do we have Gatsby himself as a romantic figure; we have critics such as Barbara Hochman, typical of critics who see Gatsby as “an essentially incorruptible man dying for a dream” (142).

Gatsby magically transcends boundaries when he puts people at ease with his symbolically significant smile. Nick not only mentions the quality of Gatsby's smile, but he also goes into detail regarding its meaning. Gatsby's magical smile reminds us of the infinite possibilities within the truly self-reliant person: "[it] assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey" (*GG* 53). Nick tells us that this smile is "rare" (*GG* 52) as well. The qualities in a self-reliant person that give hope are based on this belief in the infinite potential in everyone, for not only does Gatsby appear to believe in himself, but he also believes in others, as demonstrated in his smile. When explaining his history in the war, Gatsby "lifted up the words and nodded at them--with his smile. The smile comprehended Montenegro's troubled history and sympathized with the brave struggles of the Montenegrin people. It appreciated fully the chain of national circumstances which had elicited this tribute from Montenegro's warm little heart" (*GG* 71). Nick sees potential in Gatsby, and his validation of Gatsby's potential elevates him in our eyes as well, at least initially. It is not only in the first half of the novel that Gatsby maintains his capacity for wonder. Towards the end of the novel Gatsby smiles at Nick again, and Nick still sees the wonderment within Gatsby: "His gorgeous pink rag of a suit made a bright spot of color against the white steps . . . and he had stood on those steps, concealing his incorruptible dream . . . I thanked him for his hospitality" (*GG* 162). We see that Nick views Gatsby's dream as "incorruptible" and that Gatsby extends his "hospitality" to others time and time again. Certainly it seems that a man who embodies all of these qualities would manifest the characteristics of self-reliance as well.

Gatsby always appears to be full of promise, just as New York City in all its potential. The city's description reminds the reader how Gatsby is similar: "The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world" (*GG* 73). Gatsby seems full of the same sort of "wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty", which he encompasses in his smile as well as in his past. Jordan's recounting Gatsby's past to Nick shows that even in the past he was seen as a romantic figure. Jordan tells Nick that when Gatsby and Daisy first met, "The officer looked at Daisy while she was speaking, in a way that every young girl wants to be looked at sometime, and because it seemed romantic to me I have remembered the incident ever since. His name was Jay Gatsby" (*GG* 80). For Gatsby to wait years to see Daisy appears to indicate that he is capable of maintaining commitment and pursuing a goal, which are normally thought of as two essential character traits of the self-reliant man. Gatsby "had thrown himself into it [his dream] with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart" (*GG* 101). Nick informs us of the "colossal vitality of his illusion" (*GG* 101), which is obvious given the truly powerful nature of Gatsby's desires. Gatsby holds the incredible power of imagination and dreams.

Gatsby's history reveals another telling aspect of himself that superficially identifies him as self-reliant. The reader is told that "The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself" (*GG* 104), again suggesting a man whose energies are devoted to being the best he can be. We are

told that Gatsby had a tremendous sense of purpose in his youth: “For a while these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy’s wing” (*GG* 105). Gatsby’s “instinct toward his future glory had led him, some months before, to the small Lutheran college of St. Olaf in southern Minnesota. He stayed there two weeks, dismayed at its ferocious indifference to the drums of destiny, to destiny itself” (*GG* 105). His aspirations lead him to Dan Cody, a millionaire from the gold fields. The reader gets Nick’s interjections concerning Gatsby’s smile--“I suppose he smiled at Cody--he had probably discovered that people liked him when he smiled” (*GG* 106)--and the reader realizes that Gatsby’s aspirations probably have been formed from his youth.

Gatsby himself believes that he can be anything he wants to be, which again seems to connect him to self-reliant thought insofar as self-reliant individuals believe in themselves. From childhood Gatsby has been able to imagine the possibilities in his life, the “incomparable milk of wonder” (*GG* 117). It seems that Gatsby is willing to leap beyond his imagination to fulfill his dreams, and his courage here seems to be that which we associate with self-reliance.

Going back to Gatsby’s history with Daisy, one sees the full extent of Gatsby’s romantic nature. Even the descriptions of Daisy’s house recall romance, glamour, and hope. The house represents much to Gatsby: “It amazed him--he had never been in such a beautiful house before. But what gave it an air of breathless intensity was that Daisy lived there” (*GG* 155). We are told that to him, “There was an air of ripe mystery about it, a hint of bedrooms upstairs more beautiful and cool than other

bedrooms . . . and of romances that were not musty and laid away already in lavender but fresh and breathing and redolent of this year's shining motor cars and of dances whose flowers were scarcely withered" (*GG* 155-156). Obviously, Gatsby seems motivated by very powerful images. His fascination with Daisy's house leads to his belief that anything is possible, even for a man such as himself, who has no lineage of power and wealth, who is not "allowed" by societal rules to live his life with Daisy.

Gatsby's death even seems romantic. Nick believes that "he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass" (*GG* 169). If one were to view Gatsby as self-reliant, it would seem quite a loss to have a man with such potential murdered in such a manner. Further, from Gatsby's youth there was a sense of his potential, and Mr. Gatz gives a fleshed out picture of a young James Gatz, a boy who " 'had a big future before him, you know. He was only a young man but he had a lot of brain power here.' . . . 'If he'd of lived he'd of been a great man. A man like James J. Hill. He'd of helped build up the country'" (*GG* 176).³⁴ Mr. Gatz allows that "Of course we was broke up when he run off from home but I see now there was a reason for it. He knew he had a big future in front of him" (*GG* 181). Gatsby seems aware of his potential even in childhood, for he left to bring his dreams of grandeur to life. We know that Gatsby's

³⁴ One can note that "Buchanan's careless wealth derives direct from the Mid-West as does Gatsby's amorality. Indeed, it is perhaps significant that the latter's childhood Horatio Alger principles for attaining wealth and personal success had been inscribed in a copy of Hopalong Cassidy" (Bigsby 90).

“schedule” is of course reminiscent of Benjamin Franklin.³⁵ Mr. Gatz further comments on his son’s ability and potential: “ ‘Jimmy was bound to get ahead. He always had some resolves like this or something. Do you notice what he’s got about improving his mind? He was always great for that’ ” (*GG* 182). Of course, we must remember that this view is given from a man who fathered Gatsby, but the realization of potential is a very self-reliant ideal.

While it is comforting to view Gatsby as a romantic, self-reliant figure, it is at the point where Nick tells us of Gatsby’s obsession with Daisy that we begin to see another side to him and begin to wonder about the extent to which Gatsby is self-reliant at all. Indeed, the point where many people stop seeing Gatsby positively may well be even before our knowledge of his interest in Daisy first emerges in the novel. One can even see through the “rare smile” of Gatsby, for his smile eventually cracks under the pressure of a more than superficial examination: “Precisely at that point it vanished--and I was looking at an elegant young rough-neck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd. Some time before he introduced himself I’d got a strong impression that he was picking his words with care” (*GG* 53). Gatsby’s purpose in moving to West Egg was, admittedly, to be near Daisy and to win her back by impressing her not with the strength of his love but with ostentatious displays of wealth. The reader may begin to wonder if this is in fact something a self-reliant man

³⁵ Lena observes that “the novel emphasises that Gatsby is a highly efficient individual who even uses his spare time to study electricity” (28-29), as did Franklin. John Rohrkemper observes that “Fitzgerald obviously wishes to make the comparison between Franklin and Gatsby and their ‘plans’” (157), but observes that “Most significantly, Gatsby’s plan, unlike Franklin’s makes no mention of moral improvement; his goal appears never to be more than success--material success . . . Gatsby is as much the progeny of Franklin as he is of his biological father . . . Gatsby dreams as does Franklin, but he ultimately lacks an over-reaching vision, lacks a sense of his moral responsibility to the world, lacks a moral base” (157).

would do. Such perseverance may, at first glance, appear self-reliant, reminiscent of the two years Thoreau spent by Walden Pond trying to make a life work for the sole purpose of living as he wished; Thoreau lived with the interest of attaining an unconventional goal, one that conventional society would strongly disapprove of and definitely not understand. But the two are not alike, despite any superficial similarities they have. After all, Gatsby has built his life around renewing his relationship with a woman who has chosen to be married to another man.

Further, one need only remember Gatsby's lavish parties. The sheer excess and "ravages" involved in this lifestyle cannot be ignored: "And on Mondays eight servants including an extra gardener toiled all day with mops and scrubbing brushes and hammers and garden shears, repairing the ravages of the night before" (*GG* 43). The damage caused indicates a lack of concern on Gatsby's part for waste and destruction. It soon becomes evident that Gatsby is a perverse parody of the self-reliant man. One must examine the "machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour, if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler's thumb" (*GG* 44). According to Brian Way, "Gatsby's parties, too, are virtually his only genuine acts of creation. His dream of Daisy and the way of life she represents, whatever imaginative intensity he puts into it, is an absurd and vulgar illusion. His 'platonic conception' of himself does not differ very significantly from the pattern of Dan Cody's career--the robber baron turned playboy" (114). John Callahan observes that Gatsby is "lacking a discerning critical intelligence" (383). Way further notes that "his parties are triumphant expressions of that 'vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty' which, as we have already seen, is one of the most characteristic manifestations of

American life” (114). Gatsby, as a person who throws this kind of party, is someone who believes implicitly in the importance of society, as also seen in his need to impress and be surrounded by other people; this is a person who believes in conspicuous consumption and has no capacity to view critically this world in all its material superficiality.

Gatsby’s guests also begin to take shape; we see that even perfect strangers at his party are corrupted by the buying power of money. Nick states, “I was immediately struck by the number of young Englishmen [at the party]. . . . all talking in low voices to solid and prosperous Americans. I was sure that they were all selling something: bonds or insurance or automobiles. They were, at least, agonizingly aware of the easy money in the vicinity and convinced that it was theirs for a few words in the right key” (*GG* 46). The drunken guests Gatsby entertains are further proof not only that Gatsby relies on society, but also that the people on whom he relies are shallow and insubstantial. Gatsby’s guests are his company; the quality of the company Gatsby keeps is questionable. Of course, Thoreau did not need company, and states he “had withdrawn so far within the great ocean of solitude, into which the rivers of society empty, that for the most part . . . only the finest sediment was deposited” (*Walden* 97). Thoreau’s ideas concerning company obviously differ from Gatsby, who needs people around so that his wealth can be noticed and envied.

One character who can be used as a looking glass through which we can see Gatsby is “Owl Eyes”. Sitting in Gatsby’s library, he gives us over a page of commentary regarding Gatsby’s library: “ ‘About that. As a matter of fact you needn’t bother to ascertain. I ascertained. They’re real.’ ‘The books?’ He nodded.

‘Absolutely real--have pages and everything. I thought they’d be a nice durable cardboard. Matter of fact they’re absolutely real’ ” (GG 50). The fact that attention is called to the real but unread books in Gatsby’s library further exposes the shallow underlying identity beneath the charming façade. Gatsby is an ideal actor. As Berman (*World of Ideas*) notes, “for him [Gatsby] the house is a working theater” (183). He places pieces of evidence within and without his home, trying to convey a certain impression. In this case, one must see that he attempts to perpetrate a false demeanour in order to impress others and ultimately Daisy, and his attempt negates self-reliance: “‘It’s a bona fide piece of printed matter. It fooled me. This fella’s a regular Belasco. It’s a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop too--didn’t cut the pages. But what do you want? What do you expect?’ ” (GG 50).³⁶ The last two sentences are incredibly revealing; they point to the false values of a society that is admiringly tolerant of a man such as Gatsby, indicating that any man who conspicuously flaunts his wealth has a place in this world.³⁷ Acceptance or at least tolerance of dishonesty and façade is commonplace in this society.

³⁶ Thoreau devotes an entire chapter in *Walden* to “Reading”. He believed in the value of books, and a man such as Gatsby, who has a library of uncut books and who is obviously pretending that he is well-read to impress, is preposterous: “For what are the classics but the noblest recorded thoughts of man? . . . To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise” (*Walden* 68).

³⁷ The beginning of Chapter 4 bases much of its information on the guests who come to Gatsby’s home. The endless list of names and descriptions further demonstrate the restless and superficial quality of his activities and his guests. Bewley notes that “The list of names which Fitzgerald proceeds to enumerate conjures up with remarkable precision an atmosphere of vulgar American fortunes and vulgar American destinies” (37). Long also notes the significance of the list of names (140-143), while James Miller notes that the names are “imaginatively invoking a series of fabulous parties attended by an endless number of people--colorful, eccentric, fashionable, ambitious, bored--people, who, although they do not know Gatsby, take advantage of the opportunity to drink his liquor and eat his food” and “the device” has “intrinsic value as superb satire” (*F. Scott Fitzgerald* 116).

When Gatsby takes Nick to the city for lunch, one need only glance at the opulent car that he owns³⁸ to realize that this man is not only obsessed with being noticed, but he is also obsessed with public opinion: “ ‘Look here, old sport,’ he broke out surprisingly. ‘What’s your opinion of me anyhow?’ ” (*GG* 69). The moment we get closer to Gatsby we see the insecurity of a man who believes that his identity is definable in terms of image alone and who has little regard for the truth. At one point he tells Nick his story: “ ‘I am the son of some wealthy people in the middle-west--all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition’ ” (*GG* 69). The reader cannot help but think it is curious that a man who is claiming to be so truthful can lie with such ease. He certainly does care what people think of him if he articulates his history, a manufactured history no less, to a man he hardly knows. Further, Nick adds his commentary regarding Gatsby’s story: “He looked at me sideways--and I knew why Jordan Baker had believed he was lying. He hurried the phrase ‘educated at Oxford,’ or swallowed it or choked on it as though it had bothered him before. And with this doubt his whole statement fell to pieces and I wondered if there wasn’t something a little sinister about him after all” (*GG* 69). Even Gatsby’s fabricated history is excessive: “ ‘After that I lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe--Paris, Venice, Rome--collecting jewels, chiefly rubies, hunting big game, painting a little, things for myself only, and trying to forget something very sad that had happened to me long ago’ ” (*GG* 70). His lies are indicative of a need to impress, and implicit in these lies is a belief that acceptance by society is all-important;

³⁸ As Bert Bender notes, “The image of phallic power and beauty is evident here, as it is in ‘Gatsby’s gorgeous car. . . ’ (68)” (418-419).

these fabricated aspects of his life are essential to gain such acceptance. As Posnock notes, “In erecting other mens’ [sic] desires as his standard of value, and negating the reality of his own impulses, Gatsby entraps himself in an endless pattern of imitation. This self-negation is the source of his conspicuous reliance on mediators--models of behavior--throughout his life . . . others continually shape Gatsby” (207).

Emerson’s antinomianism allows for “breaking the law” if such action springs from deep conviction and serves a larger purpose; however, Gatsby has no noble, larger view that could be used to justify his law breaking. Gatsby is corrupt; there is no other way that a speeding ticket can be waved off with a simple card to a policeman. Nick tells us, “Taking a white card from his wallet he [Gatsby] waved it before the man’s eyes. ‘Right you are,’ agreed the policeman, tipping his cap. ‘Know you next time, Mr. Gatsby. Excuse *me!*’ ‘What was that?’ I inquired. ‘The picture of Oxford?’ ‘I was able to do the commissioner a favor once, and he sends me a Christmas card every year’ ” (*GG* 72-73). Gatsby, being exempt from the law, superficially recalls Thoreau, who broke the law when he neglected to pay his taxes because he would not support a war he believed was unjust.³⁹ However, Gatsby’s corruption only serves himself, and no one else.⁴⁰ Meyer Wolfsheim, one of Gatsby’s “gonnegtions”, is a gangster, and even he is not exempt from the conformity others in the novel present. He even admires Gatsby openly: “ ‘Fine fellow, isn’t he? Handsome to look at and a perfect

³⁹ See Thoreau’s 1849 “Resistance to Civil Government” (Norton Critical Edition), pp. 226-245.

⁴⁰ As Alberto Lena notes, “Like Gatsby, who breaks with his past by reinventing himself . . . these individuals of the first caste are the creators of their own values and pay no heed to law and conventions” (28). Also, Perosa notes that “Gatsby is a self-made man, an unscrupulous parvenu with no distinction or social background. He had met and lost Daisy in his youth, and his lifelong aim has been to recapture her, to become again acceptable to her. But he has no social or cultural tradition, and he remains a ‘newly rich’ outsider” (65).

gentleman.’ ‘Yes.’ ‘He’s an Oggsford man’ ” (*GG* 76). It is not surprising that Wolfsheim thinks of Gatsby so positively, for this entire society focuses on the superficial. This criminal further idealizes Gatsby: “ ‘I made the pleasure of his acquaintance just after the war. But I knew I had discovered a man of fine breeding after I talked to him an hour. I said to myself: “There’s the kind of man you’d like to take home and introduce to your mother and sister” ’ ” (*GG* 76). For his part, Gatsby’s knowledge of Meyer Wolfsheim after the latter’s departure further shows the extent of Gatsby’s involvement in the criminal world: “ ‘Meyer Wolfsheim? No, he’s a gambler.’ Gatsby hesitated, then added coolly: ‘He’s the man who fixed the World’s Series back in 1919.’ ‘Fixed the World’s Series?’ I repeated. The idea staggered me . . . It never occurred to me that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people--with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe” (*GG* 78). Continuing with this idea, Nick is still shocked: “ ‘How did he happen to do that?’ I asked after a minute. ‘He just saw the opportunity.’ ‘Why isn’t he in jail?’ ‘They can’t get him, old sport. He’s a smart man’ ” (*GG* 78). Gatsby’s true colors show here. He does not pay any mind to the morality of an action, but he simply sees that Wolfsheim was “smart” to take advantage of a great “opportunity”.

Gatsby’s inclusion in this society allows for his treatment of people as objects, or things to buy. Essentially, he offers Nick money in exchange for the fact that Nick allows his home to be the meeting ground for him and Daisy: “ ‘you see, I carry on a little business on the side, a sort of a sideline, you understand. And I thought that if you don’t make very much--You’re selling bonds, aren’t you, old sport?’ ‘Trying to.’ ‘Well, this would interest you. It wouldn’t take up much of your time and you might pick up a

bit of money. It happens to be a rather confidential sort of thing' ” (*GG* 87-88).

Gatsby is not only offering a job or money “obviously and tactlessly for a service to be rendered” (*GG* 88), but he is also leading the reader into more speculation regarding the sources of his money and his “business”.⁴¹ The illegality of Gatsby’s business is approached later on in the novel; during the scene in which the group is in a hotel room at the Plaza, Tom fires accusations at Gatsby regarding his business activities: “ ‘Who are you anyway?’ broke out Tom. ‘You’re one of that bunch that hangs around Meyer Wolfsheim--that much I happen to know. I’ve made a little investigation into your affairs’ ” (*GG* 141). Tom even goes further with these accusations: “ ‘I found out what your “drug stores” were,’ He turned to us and spoke rapidly. ‘He and this Wolfsheim bought up a lot of side-street drug stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter. That’s one of his little stunts. I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw him and I wasn’t far wrong’ ” (*GG* 141). Gatsby himself does not refute these accusations. He simply accepts them and responds accordingly. His acquiescence to Tom’s information is suspicious; one would imagine that if Gatsby felt he were being unjustly accused he would have denied Tom’s statements. As a matter of fact, his response is simply, “ ‘What about it?’ said Gatsby politely. ‘I guess your friend Walter Chase wasn’t too proud to come in on it’ ” (*GG* 141). Further speculation is brought in; Tom hints that “ ‘That drug store business was just small change . . . but you’ve got something on now that Walter’s afraid to tell me about’ ” (*GG* 141). It is only now that Gatsby starts to defend himself, “denying everything, defending his name against

⁴¹ Berman (*World of Ideas*) mentions rightly that “Gatsby’s ‘business’ reality is getting or extorting money. He thinks about this activity, or rather avoids thinking about it, saying first that his money has been inherited and second (more honest and less rehearsed) that it has been earned. There are two fictions here: he is lying not only to Nick but to himself” (121).

accusations that had not been made” (*GG* 142).⁴² However, the damage has been done, for now the reader has no doubt about the true nature of Gatsby’s “idealistic” dreams of grandeur because of his lies and his connections with criminal activities: “Against these ‘things’--the irrevocable history of a honeymoon in a particular place, the fact of a real daughter--Gatsby has no defense; his fantastic ambitions have run aground on the rock of the world . . . Tom’s unrefuted claims, the narrator tells us, ‘seemed to bite physically into Gatsby,’ and later we learn that ‘“Jay Gatsby” had broken up like glass against Tom’s hard malice’ (140, 155).” (Coleman, 228). Further, Gatsby not only involves himself in criminal activities, but also his actions show the very extent to which he will go in violating the law for his pointless and insignificant dream. Even disregarding the illegality of his occupation, one must continually remember that Gatsby is only trying to further selfish interests that only better his own situation.

Of course, no discussion of Gatsby would be entirely complete without examining his relationship with Daisy, because winning back Daisy is behind all of Gatsby’s acts and gestures. It is difficult for the reader not to view his commitment to the relationship initially as romantic, sincere, and passionate. However, in deconstructing some of the aspects of the relationship, one is able to see clearly a background of corruption, adultery, materialism, and many other distinctly unromantic qualities. Truly, as Bigsby states, “Despite the romantic façade with which he cloaks his relationship with Daisy it is no different in kind to Tom’s tawdry relationship with

⁴² Lena astutely notes that “Here we see the issue at the very heart of *The Great Gatsby*: the confrontation between a man of the second caste and a newcomer from the third caste now raised to the caste of the rulers. Nick Carraway’s choice of Gatsby as the representative of the American dream implies that it is an amoral ideal, because Gatsby has acquired his wealth through criminal activities” (29).

Myrtle Wilson.” (92). In fact, it would not be a stretch to say that love has nothing to do with this relationship at all.

Gatsby idealized Daisy in his youth, but only because she was rich, popular, and well known. Daisy was never a meaningful goal in herself. Richard Godden rightly states that “Gatsby *loves* Daisy because she is his point of access to a dominant class” (349, italics mine). Daisy is a perfect trophy for a man such as Gatsby because she epitomizes the wealth and power he desires. Critics have realized that Daisy is an icon for Gatsby; as Fussel notes, “Daisy finally becomes for Gatsby the iconic manifestation of this dubious vision of beauty” (47). In other words, “Daisy represents the materialism of her class” (Moyer 221). As an icon, she emerges as an utterly frivolous goal to attain. As Kermit Vanderbilt notes, “Fitzgerald, like James, suggests also the shortcomings of the American’s idealized conception of himself--Gatsby’s inability to recognize his complicity in the corrupt world of which he had become a part. It was a misconception of the complex and impure substance from which the American’s imagined purity had sprung Gatsby’s incorruptible self-image also spelled his doom” (301). During the tour around his mansion, he sees himself as having meaning for Daisy entirely on the basis of his material possessions. He knows that these “things” will impress Daisy, not only because he can now support her, but also because these material things are a part of Daisy’s life; these are the possessions that make Daisy comfortable: “With enchanting murmurs Daisy admired this aspect or that of the feudal silhouette against the sky, admired the gardens, the sparkling odor of jonquils and the frothy odor of hawthorn and plum blossoms and the pale gold odor of kiss-me-at-the-gate” (*GG* 96). Even more importantly, he lacks the independence of thought to see

this shallowness critically, or to realize what her materialism says about her as a desirable goal. There is really no better place for Gatsby to set the stage for his and Daisy's relationship. The sheer extravagance of the rooms, "period bedrooms swathed in rose and lavender silk and vivid with new flowers, through dressing rooms and poolrooms, and bathrooms with sunken baths" (*GG* 96), is quite repulsive when someone like Thoreau, who lived in a tiny home isolated in the woods, comes to mind. Where Thoreau had only his own values as a guide, Gatsby, as Nick states, "hadn't once ceased looking at Daisy and I think he revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes" (*GG* 97); he sees her as an infallible measuring stick whereby he determines what is meaningful in life.

The power of his dream in itself is beyond question, but Daisy, as a goal, is of course frivolous and insubstantial, especially as a goal for a supposedly self-reliant figure. Her very manifestation of conventional society's values and ideals negates a straightforward connection between Gatsby and Emerson. Gatsby knows, further, that there are certain things that he values and that Daisy values above others; the infamous scene in which he tosses his shirts in the air, one after the other, is an example of the sheer childishness of his need to impress Daisy: "He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them one by one before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk . . . While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher" (*GG* 97). Michael Vincent Miller does note that "Both Emma [Bovary] and Gatsby feed in adolescence on popular images of romance to inflate their hopes. And both use this imagery to create new selves, as though the self is all surface and appearance--the manners, expensive clothes, and paraphernalia that their cultures treat as the stuff of being desirable" (127).

Daisy's reaction is curious, however. She begins to cry: " 'They're such beautiful shirts,' she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. 'It makes me sad because I've never seen such--such beautiful shirts before' " (GG 98). Many critics debate the significance of this statement. Ross Posnock notes that "Her orgasmic response to Gatsby's shirts is also ironic and absurd, in that she shows more emotion for Gatsby's possessions than for Gatsby. But, in fact, Gatsby becomes his possessions here, and his display of clothing a symbolic sexual act; it is his means of arousing Daisy" (208). It seems very likely that Daisy's emotional outlet is such that it only allows for expressions of emotion concerning material possessions.⁴³

When we recall that this is the woman for whom Gatsby has waited, Fitzgerald may be inviting us to ask the following question: what is more contemptible, the frivolous object or the person worshiping the frivolous object? Gatsby dreams of a woman of little or no substance, except in terms of the money that she has: "Jay Gatsby pursues Daisy knowing that her sense of happiness and the good life depends on money and property." (Callahan 380-81). Callahan further argues that "so pervasive is the culture of material success that his new reverence and tenderness toward her are inseparable from money and possessions" (381). One must remember, however, that his ultimate goal is simply to be an accepted part of this society, as epitomized in Daisy. It is important to remember also that Gatsby probably does not know the difference between love and acquisition, and the desire to possess seems to be behind much of his "love" for Daisy. In fact, according to Gatsby, what stands out most in Daisy, as we

⁴³ Moyer adds another interpretation to this scene; he suggests that she is "moved not so much by the shirts themselves as by the intense emotion with which Gatsby has invested them" (221). Donaldson also sees that Daisy "is most deeply moved by Gatsby's spectacular *display* of his many expensive shirts" ("Possessions" 20, italics mine).

have seen, is that “ ‘Her voice is full of money’ ” (*GG* 127). Stern rightly mentions that “He has learned what his society has taught him--how he has learned from the very beginning!--about money-mobility. Gatsby identifies that promise in Daisy’s voice and ties the idea of money as identity to all the alluring promise of identity” (233). Of course, this “shows Gatsby’s understanding of the link between love and money” (Lewis 50). Daisy’s true representation is of monetary value. She is “the golden girl” (*GG* 127). In looking at Gatsby and Daisy’s past together, one can further see the implications of Gatsby’s materialistic dream. Gatsby may say that he loves her, but when he thinks of her he is thinking of the woman who is “High in a white palace” (*GG* 127). Daisy is indistinguishable from, and at one with, the class to which he aspires, and the fact “that many men had already loved Daisy . . . increased her value in his eyes” (*GG* 156). He bases his “love” on society’s false criteria of value, and this love is continually referred to in monetary terms.⁴⁴ This obsession with the golden girl becomes, as Nick explains, “the following of a grail” (*GG* 156), but it is a grail that is intrinsically worthless. Daisy, who is “gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (*GG* 157), is someone Gatsby idealizes, but only because “her porch was bright with the bought luxury of star-shine; the wicker of the settee squeaked fashionable as she turned toward him . . . and Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves” (*GG* 157). As Donaldson points out, “In Gatsby’s imagination, Daisy and her house are inseparable” (205). It

⁴⁴ This idea has been approached by critics such as Roger Lewis, who notes that “What Gatsby, with surprising consciousness, states is that Daisy’s charm is allied to the attraction of wealth; money and love hold similar attractions” (50). Posnock also notes Gatsby’s materialism, and he notes that for Gatsby, “She is never simply Daisy, but is inseparable from the objects that surround her” (206).

becomes clear that Gatsby is not truly in love with Daisy but with the idea of being accepted by the social stratum she represents. As Posnock notes, “Gatsby’s interest in her is not simply spontaneous or self-generated but stimulated by others’ desires” (206). His goal is nothing more than to be a member of a wealthy upper class, and his obsession with a mere status symbol precludes any possibility that he could be considered self-reliant. He is, in terms of his dream and what it represents, indeed the “bold sensualist”, and the superficial quality of his self-reliance is not sufficiently powerful to mask his deep-seated materialism.

Conclusion

It has been seen that, when trying to connect Gatsby with transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, while a superficial resemblance can be seen initially, it quickly breaks down. Emerson and Thoreau would never view the acquisition of money of and for its own sake as a worthy goal. We can see, in an examination of Gatsby, that not only does he pursue wealth to further his social status, but he also tries to attract the attention of a woman who personifies the corrupt and materialistic values of conventional society. Self-reliant individuals are exhorted by Emerson to reject conventional society and its values. Embracing the values of conventional society prevents true individuality from developing. Gatsby desires only to be wealthy and well known; everything he does is to gain acceptance, be it from Daisy or society in general. If Gatsby were an honest, true individual, he would never have changed his identity and lied to people regarding his background. His fabricated history is made up of elements most of which are simply untrue. The ability to have direction in life that is driven by inner conviction is also a self-reliant individual's trait. Here, although Gatsby appears to have a goal, one that he pursues with intense energy, it is an insubstantial goal, for Gatsby wishes only to gain the acceptance of a society epitomized by Daisy.

Crucial to the self-reliant life is a need to be independent of conventional societal values. Self-reliance, as an ideal, consists of not only acknowledging one's potential, but also living free from societal concerns. Chapter one explored Emerson's and

Thoreau's relevant works, noting that self-reliance is a concept allowing for true individuality and denying compliance to a conventional society. These ideas must be kept in mind when examining the society in *The Great Gatsby*, especially Gatsby himself. Chapter two, outlining the milieu that Gatsby desires to join, demonstrated that all the characters, whether rich or poor, are concerned with the same materialistic goals. If Gatsby were truly distinct from the people who surround him, then his goals should also be distinct. The fact that they are not is seen in the fact that all the novel's characters, Gatsby included, want to be rich and accepted. In sharp contrast to the self-reliant person, Gatsby needs the approval of other people for self-completion. Chapter three argued that Gatsby cannot be distinguished from the other figures in the novel, except in the most superficial way. Even in his desire for change he does not differ from the others. Fitzgerald intends us to be critical of Gatsby's seeming idealism, for it thinly masks his materialism and conventionality. In fact, Gatsby is Emerson's "bold sensualist", the antithesis to the self-reliant man. Fitzgerald, in setting up Gatsby as a "bold sensualist", at once holds up self-reliance as a worthy goal while at the same time criticizing a society that makes it virtually impossible for self-reliant people to exist, let alone thrive. Hitherto, Fitzgerald studies, while acknowledging Gatsby's vulgarity and materialism, have clung to a belief in Gatsby's promise, as seen in his apparent idealism. This thesis has attempted to show that Gatsby and the novel's other characters fundamentally are indistinguishable and as such, can be evaluated in a similar manner, as Fitzgerald's America is a land where self-reliance is virtually non-existent.

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